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THAT WHICH HAPPENED

THAT WHICH HAPPENED

BY
IVAN SHMELOV

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
By C. J. HOGARTH



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PREFACE.

IVAN SHMELOV was born in Moscow in 1873. A member of a professional family of good standing, he enjoyed from boyhood the additional advantage of living amongst a great industrial population drawn from every quarter of the Russian Empire. This enabled him early to become familiar with the form and spirit of the people's speech, and, later, to transmit that familiarity to a literary style which critics have unanimously acclaimed as virile, clear, and purely Russian.

Brought up in a family of strictly religious views, the boy had for first books of study the gospels and lives of the Saints, and for first objectives the ancient monasteries of the Muscovite region. Graduating at the Imperial University of Moscow in law, history, philology and natural science, he practised for three years as a barrister, and then entered the State Department of Forests, a branch of the service which, involving as it did extensive rural tours, brought him into close contact

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with the peasantry, and so enabled him to augment his resources for literary composition.

After the revolution of 1905 he resigned from the Civil Service, and devoted himself exclusively to literature. His first novel, *The Man from the Restaurant*, created a sensation. So true was it to life, and so vivid in its realism, that a legend arose that the author himself had earned his living as a *garçon*. In the story a kindly, simple old waiter who daily and nightly is compelled to behold scenes of gilded vice, false splendour, and real tragedy, preserves his spiritual nobility intact, and illustrates the triumph inevitably achieved by moral courage over temptation. Reaching several editions in Russia, the work was translated into more than one foreign language, and achieved a European reputation. Next came *The Hidden Chorus*, a work prophetic, in some respects, of the Great War, and then *The Inexhaustible Cup*, a work treating of the love of a humble artist for a lady whose portrait he comes insensibly to worship as an *ikon*. Lastly, after the issue of some charming works for children, of a work called *The Amusing Adventure*, and of an immense number of minor works, articles, folk-tales,

and essays, there was published early in the present year the work here presented.

On the Bolsheviks' seizure of Moscow, the author and his family succeeded in escaping to the Crimea, where for four years they were fated to live amongst scenes of almost unimaginable horror. The story of how the Bolsheviks gradually annihilated life from the region which Europe once knew as "The Pearl of Russia." is to be described by M. Shmelov in a work entitled *The Sun of the Dead*. The horrors of the Crimean Terror were emphasised by the fact that they took place amongst some of the fairest scenery which Europe can show; in a region where, to quote M. Shmelov, "golden sunshine reigns under amethyst skies." The shooting without trial of a hundred thousand defenceless people, until cellars, gardens, and ravines became heaped with the corpses which could not be taken away and cast into the sea; the universal wastage of wealth acquired through generations of toil and thought; the forced conversion of the surviving population into a race of cave-dwellers, troglodytes, creatures compelled, amid a once bountiful land, to win a miserable subsistence from raw leaves and

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roots; the unchecked outraging of women, and even of young girls: these things M. Shmelov proposes to describe as his eyes beheld them.

Like other sufferers in the unfortunate peninsula, M. Shmelov and his family had long to subsist upon roots, leaves, and vine-stalks. And even this was not all. Nightly they had to sit in trembling expectation of a visit from some band of robbers prepared to torture and kill; hourly they had to look for the arrival of a summons from some Bolshevist tribunal. The man to whom the Bolsheviks had assigned the Crimea for his peculiar exploitation and defilement was Bela Kun, the alien ex-president of a Communist *régime* in Hungary; and with Bela were his secretary-mistress, a woman named Samoilova (but better known amongst her comrades as "Zemliachka" or "The Country Woman"), and the president of the Crimean Tche-Ka, an alien named Meiklesohn. Together these three shed blood like water as, in the communistic phrase, they "swept the country with an iron broom," and organised and directed scenes which, as with much else that then happened in Russia, would seem to question the sanity of the ruling

minds of the Bolshevik movement. In all, this trio of atavistic survivals were led by their zeal for propagating one of the oldest, most reactionary, and most futile of politico-economic creeds to do to death over a hundred and twenty thousand men, women, and children.

To quote M. Shmelov, "the operation was a war against civilised humanity; a Golgotha which the life of Europe passed by with averted eyes; an extermination which its perpetrators sought to elevate into a symbol of truth through persuasion of the popular ignorance that thereby the people would advance to a beatific existence based upon 'fraternity and equality'; a putting into practice of Marxian principles by men and women who, if ever their breasts had contained a sense of pity, had long since ousted it thence; a triumphant introduction of the 'New Man,' as a horrible portent of potentialities more horrible still; a debauch of conquest by a herd which, after befooling the unenlightened populace, and laying its claws upon the amenities of life, was engaged in digging for that populace the sepulchre into which massacre, famine, and pestilence subsequently swept upwards of twenty million souls—a

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hecatomb in comparison with which the deeds of Tamerlane and Attila sink to the level of child's play."

Only an accident saved M. Shmelov himself from being shot. One day he received from Yata ("where the butcher's cleaver then happened to be working") a registration summons, and, on repairing to the Bolshevist headquarters, encountered, in the person of the registration official, a communist who had formerly been one of his literary admirers, and known to him personally. On learning that M. Shmelov's departure from Moscow had taken place *subsequently to* the Bolshevist occupation, the official at once recognised that registration would entail M. Shmelov being shot as a fugitive from Bolshevist rule; wherefore, nodding to the author as though he had duly registered his name, the official in reality omitted to do so, and was helped in the subterfuge by the fact that at the moment no one else happened to be near.

Also, it was in the Crimea that the author lost his only son. Gassed on the German front when serving as an artillery officer, and subsequently wounded when serving in the ranks of the volunteer army raised by General

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Wrangel in a gallant effort to avert the Bolshevik peril, M. Shmelov's son had for six months been residing with his parents as an invalid when Bolshevik agents seized him, threw him into a dungeon, starved him for a while, and, finally, shot him without trial.

After fruitless endeavours to obtain redress, M. and Mme. Shmelov decided to attempt flight. And eventually they succeeded in reaching France, where they joined M. Shmelov's old friends and compatriots, the well-known writers. Bunin and Kuprin.

For some reason not wholly apparent, *That Which Happened* was not banned on its appearance by the Soviet authorities, but allowed to circulate in Soviet territory. Possibly this was because, obsessed with a sort of Teutonic genius for blundering in matters of psychological interpretation, the Bolshevik censors misread the book, and overlooked its irony. And in any case men who could believe that an arbitrary decree and a sort of dull, brutish display of profanity could lead an innately religious people to forsake its God could misread anything!

The central episode of the work turns upon the struggles of a soul which the quest of a

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world of "heavenly light" and "truth and love"—a world which should be superior to the present one, and able to subdue in man the beast-like element—has bereft of reason. Hence one wonders the more that certain Continental critics should have described M. Shmelov as "a Christian Mirabeau," seeing that (as Kuprin, in particular, has pointed out) the works of Mirabeau are instinct with gall and the spirit of revolt, whereas the literature of Shmelov is essentially a literature of resignation and love.

"In this work," another Continental *littérateur* says, "we feel the throbbing of a tumultuous pain. Actuality takes on a tinge of delirium, and the world of everyday glows in the mystic light of the world of dreams. Whence, therefore, the work's spasmodic force? How come we to derive an impression of a rhythm now revolving like a waterspout, now rushing ahead until brought up before some unlooked-for obstacle? Witness the frenzied motor drive to the spot where the demented colonel has displayed his 'danger notice,' the placard proclaiming that 'This is the *Otdiel Lunae*,' 'the department of the moon.' Nor can we fail to be struck with the

curious type-continuity observable in the work, with the continuity between, for example, the Oriental snake-charmer who cracks nuts with an ancient crucifix and the 'Argentinian' spy who has a nose so distinctively Slavonic. Almost nightmare figures, too, are the story's two 'reasoning beasts,' the ruddy, complacent, matter-of-fact doctor, and the broad-faced chauffeur with the nape of neck 'mirroring his soul.' . . . In all of M. Shmelov's works the figures issue as though twisted with pain, as though spat from the lips along with blood and matter. . . . Yet, though the theme throws itself about in convulsions, it is justified, uplifted by the grandeur of human suffering."

For the rest, let the author speak for himself:

"For us Russians who are denied publication in our own country, where the Soviet Government has monopolised the means of literary output, destroyed private printing-presses, and sought to subject free composition to restrictions of a narrow, tendencious nature, it is becoming increasingly necessary to depend upon translations of our works into foreign tongues.

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“For my own part, however, I feel that I am writing for more than a reader’s delectation. I feel that I am writing because there confronts me the apparently impossible task of helping Russia to attain a renovation cultural and artistic, spiritual and material. I feel that something in our present-day humanity is terribly, terribly amiss; that humanity is fixed in a fatal cleft; that the world has in it too much charlatanry and brutality and oppression, and haste and turmoil and rivalry, so that it cannot obtain the rest, which it so sorely needs. Yet, in saying this, I am not speaking of the world’s workers, whom I love, and whose appreciation of cultural values I admire. Those of whom I am speaking are the class of ‘insatiable appetite,’ the gross, half-educated strata whose motive is a desire to obtain other people’s clothes and motor-cars and pictures, the strata which constitute the predatory band of Communist-Bolsheviks, the strata to which robbery of the robbed is a thing both goodly and lawful.

“But also I feel that, for the carving out of life’s journey, there exist for all men certain great fundamental truths. I feel that,

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Despite, in the midst of, our human wanderings, humanity will yet discover the outlet to humanity's true destiny, seeing that it is not forms of state that matter, but (as Leo Tolstoy has truly said) man himself, and man alone. This is because there dwells in man the God of Love, the God whom all of us ought to project into our daily lives. And were you to ask of me, 'What is your fundamental principle in your literary labours?' I should reply, 'Faith in the deathless spirit of mankind.'

"For I love man, and I believe in man, in his great spiritual forces. Also, I believe in God, the God who dwells in man, and has His habitation about him. And I love Nature, whom I feel to be beautiful, and able to afford comfort and a last refuge when the human beast has come forth to slay. It is in Nature that God most makes Himself felt; it is in Nature that God most makes His presence known.

"Hence, in spiritual growth, and in universal love, we see the world's only possible saviours. And so long as God shall abide in man, so long will hope not utterly be lost. True, He may be threatened with temporary banish-

ment, He may be threatened with forgetfulness; but He will never be ousted entirely. And, for the same reason, the greatest of the world's contemporary crimes is that abrogation of the God-Spirit, of the Soul-Lever, of Life's Spiritual Creator, and Miraculous Progenitor, which we see being perpetrated by the Communist-Bolshevist-Positivist faction. It is the crowning iniquity of these persons that, after divorcing themselves from the spirit of the People's God, of the God whom they had never known aright, they are attempting to fill the vacuum with—with what? With satisfaction—violent, reckless satisfaction—of material cravings, with incitements to the attainment of sordid amenities, with cultivation solely of the base. To attain this end, these people have distributed Russia's Bibles to butchers, for the exquisite leaves of Testaments printed in the old Synodal Press to be used for meat-wrappers, or to have displayed upon them piles of lard or liver or salt or what not. Imagine the thing! And I myself have seen it. As for Russia's secular libraries, they have been converted into paper for cigarettes! Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and Shakespeare and Dickens and Pushkin and Gogol

and Kluchevsky¹ and Carlyle and Turgenev and Victor Hugo have been torn to shreds!

"And what memorials have the Bolsheviks erected? They have erected memorials to—
to *Marx*! Yes, *his* gospel is being thrust down Russian throats; *his* gospel is being battered into Russian heads—through holes made by revolver bullets when no other road will serve. I myself, at a meeting in the Crimea, heard a ruffian of an executioner shout to such of the local intellectuals as had not yet been murdered—shout, as he brandished a revolver at the miserable, trembling band: 'Open your brains, you who have stuffed yourselves with learning at the people's expense, and show the people those brains! Else, we will very soon open them for you!'—a true witticism of a Jack Ketch!

"I love the people, and I know the people. I have written of their failings, as I have written of their merits. And I am no hide-

¹ Some time ago the translator heard that the Bolsheviks had issued versions of Kluchevsky bowdlerised to suit their own very peculiar views; and although he cannot vouch for the truth of the story, or say on what lines the piece of clumsy fooling was carried out (seeing that no copy of the alleged versions has been submitted to the judgment of civilisation), the existence of certain *known* Bolshevik editions *à vive* at least justifies the report.

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bound conservative, no blind adherent of an order just because it is old. But when, with a hand seeming to clutch at my heart, I look upon the sepulchre, the madhouse, the veritable 'House of the Dead,' into which the Bolsheviks have converted Russia; when I peer into the vast catacomb of shackled slaves, of Russia's ex-workers, of men and women deprived of their right of free speech, of their every other right, of everything in the world save their helpless detestation of the commissar; when I remember that the Russia of to-day contains not a single free journal beyond the official sheets, and that no man there may say what he thinks; and that already ten millions of Russia's workless have perished of hunger, and that, nevertheless, corn is being exported from our famine-stricken land that, with the gold thus obtained, the Communists may continue their task of 'internationalising,' of laying greedy hands upon, the world's every land and every people (including even free England and the English), and imposing upon those lands and peoples the rule of the beast; when I see even great statesmen of Europe not disdaining to enter into relations with the predatory band—well, then I stand

aghast, and, remembering Abraham Lincoln, ask myself: 'Is the end of all things come? Has the last man of lofty spirit vanished from the universe?'

"Hence there reign in Russia only horror and desolation. Nowhere is there to be found justice save the justice based upon violence. Nowhere is there to be found reason. Almost without exception Russia's writers and thinkers have either fled the country or been banished thence by official decree. For scarcely a man of them felt that he could accept Bolshevism: aye, even though such as had accepted it might have remained where they were, and been suffered to enjoy the amenities of life equally with the commissars; and received flattery and consideration. Russia's intellectuals would not do this. They would not do as the Devil urged Christ in the wilderness to do; they would not 'fall down and worship my earthly kingdom.' No, to gilded lackeydom they preferred the bitter bread of exile. A few, a very few, succumbed to the temptation. But by far the greater number have fled to live in poverty in France and England and elsewhere.

"Yet there exist in Europe great intellects

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which profess to discern in Bolshevism something 'notable,' something 'effective.' And they toy with it. And they even wish it well. Ah, the Bolsheviks have polished those observers' spectacles until the foul swamp has come to look from afar like a glittering lake! But in the lake there is a corpse. And daily that corpse is poisoning the air with its stench.

"My outlook upon the world, do you say? Well, when a boy, I looked upon the world with a boy's eyes, but now I have gained experience, and care little whether I be praised or blamed, seeing that I know the emptiness of words, and that known to me also are the right direction of my duty and the right manner of its performance. Benumbed and horror-stricken, I see in Russia a mad, sordid, reckless rush to attain fleshly things, to attain gratification of the senses. And they who are engaged in the rush are none the less being bruised and trampled upon by their own 'leaders,' but, having put away the question of how, or why life should be lived, and adopted, instead, the cry of "To live, to live, to live at any cost!" they have conceived such a beast-like hunger for life as knows no obstacle, and embraced for their *motif* the

motif of force. And Russia stands on a knife-edge. And beyond that knife-edge—the abyss. Into that abyss there have rolled already, as a clique caroused, millions of dim, helpless souls of peasantry and of gentry. And other souls are rolling thither. And they will be followed by yet others. For a ‘leader’ is ever waiting to give the signal, to launch ‘the flaming word’ (of which material he has a mountainous store), to turn a handle, and—to entrap further millions of ‘my fellow citizens.’ Oh! it is so fantastically easy, is that method of destruction! For the number of souls that within a month can become fired with the yearning ‘to live,’ and with the will to employ force to that end, and—and to be converted into clay, is countless.

“Hence in some great regulator of life, in some great guiding force, we see the world’s imperative need. Else—death. And the recognition of this fact has long tortured us Russian thinkers compelled to impotence. Yet, though the great regulating force has not made its appearance, appear it will.

“My literary manner? my school? Well, some call me a Realist, and others a Neo-Realist; but I call myself nothing, save in so

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far as that I love the bright, sunny, full-blooded Russian word-form, and love, and feel to be real and tangible, the virile and sonorous, yet tender and supple, language whose musical intonation stimulated at once itself and its hearer; the language of Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, and Tolstoy. That language we Russians ought ever to preserve, and reverently to develop. For it contains the whole Russian soul. The people that shall cleave to that language will never wholly disappear.

"To some my writings may seem to have a lyrical tendency; but if so, if in them Nature bulks largely, the fact is due less to Nature, for her own sake than to the fact that humanity's doings and thoughts bear to her so close a relation.

"Lastly, I feel that, for all the differences of fortune which distinguish England from Russia, for all the sharp cleavages between the national characters, modes of life, and positions of world-outlook of the two, the British nation and the Russian possess many spiritual points of contact. Nations should be judged or appraised, not by certain chance or transitory phases in their history, but by a process of casting into the scales of world-

judgment their achievements in the provinces of intellect and spirituality, as expressed in the best exponents of their national essence, in the best of their writers, thinkers, and scientists. Mighty England possesses many such, and the world loves and admires them. And Russia has had such, and will have them yet again. In the one country thunders the colossal Shakespeare; from the other comes the once dim, misunderstood Dostoevsky, making his way increasingly through the ranks of humanity. Dickens weeps, jests, and laments man's weaknesses and woes: Gogol, with a biting word, explodes in peals of laughter. Byron and Pushkin, Carlyle and Danilevsky, Green and Kluchevsky, Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Soloviev, and many other Russian and British writers find their complement, or their parallel, or their affinity in some great writer of England or Russia as the case may be. But always should we remember this fundamental fact: that, as yet, Russia is young, with a cultural age of no more than a hundred, and that now she is being subjected to such a test as has never befallen any other nation.

“And the same reason causes the soul of

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Russia, more and more to appreciate communion with the souls of sister nations, lest in these terrible days, when nations and their higher cultures are being threatened with destruction, Russia should feel herself utterly alone. Through such communion the Russian soul will gather strength to endure. Through such communion the Russian soul may be enabled to whisper to others a portion of that knowledge which only suffering can bring."

Thus M. Shmelov. His words may not unfitly be commended to the attention of that section of the British public which, though ready to weep easy tears over the self-imposed tribulations of nations which recently strained every nerve to lay England in the dust, have never shed a tear for, and scarcely ever given a thought to, the undeserved agony of a nation which, until stabbed from behind through treachery, fought with unsurpassed gallantry, and with an almost unparalleled lack of warlike resources, in the cause that was both Russia's and our own.

1923.

C. J. HOCARTH.

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I

THAT it happened I know for a certainty.

It happened at a time when I was seized with a frenzy of horror, and felt swirl around me a hurricane bordering between sense and insanity.

It happened during the attack near M——. At least, I *think* it happened then. No, I will speak positively (to do so inspires confidence), and say that it *did* happen then. The German cavalry made their appearance in our rear, and the Front was broken.

But to go back a little.

Two months earlier I was buried through the explosion of a German mine. For forty-eight hours I lay underneath the surface of the ground, under some beams which fortunately had become crossed above me. I lay there as in a tomb. From somewhere or other air reached me. Over my head men marched to the attack, bayoneted one another,

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and deluged my place of burial with blood. At one moment, would I hear hoarse German cries of "Teufel!" or "Mein Gott!"; at another the rattling of a compatriot's throat; at another, a volley of abuse; at another imploring moans.

During those two days that portion of the Front, a portion mole-tunnelled with trenches, and stuffed with horrible nitre and toluols, until it had become as porous as a Swiss cheese, changed hands five times. Drunken death danced over me a *cæn-can*. Alternatively, I gave way to despair, yielded to mad terror, tried to strangle myself with the strap of my breeches, lost consciousness, prayed (yes, prayed!), cursed, gnawed my fingers, played games with my hands, tore my hair, and fell to shouting "Hurrah!" Lastly, to avoid final loss of my reason, I took to repeating, until I became sick and stupefied: "*A plus b, squared, equals—*."

And over my head men still struggled, and trampled, and yelled, and killed one another.

How strange it seemed to be following the war from a sepulchre! There occurred to me the whimsical idea that, given five poods' weight of explosives, I could have blown up

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myself and the whole mob of chimpanzees and gorillas together—and, gladly! Then there came to me thoughts of “Homo,” my darling red setter, who had been killed by a shell. I thought of how, with a flask about his neck, he had been wont to go and seek the wounded by night. Well, at least he had been better than *they*!

Thus, entombed, was I able to appraise values with eyes of detachment.

But at length the dance of death came to an end, and the heaped human carrion was cleared away, and the German horde beaten back. And, next, my groans were heard amid the silence of the night, and I was dispatched homeward on “extended leave.”

Two months’ leave! What a glorious time it should be! And what a glorious time it was! It passed like a restful, sunlit dream.

I spent it wide of the rut of life. I lived all the time, yet was not alive. And I was boundlessly happy. The life of the Blessed Ones must be very similar.

For me women had passed out of existence. I had, as it were, given my strength to the earth. Such excellence must have been the secret of the anchorites of old.

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Women? What were they? Merely machines for population-manufacture. To a painted canary-bird of a wench who was twittering away about hobbies, from Fourier and Bergson to Abortism and the Futurists (she had completed a year and a half in the Faculty, and gone through the Sanitation Course, and become an advocate of Free Love), I remember saying — saying quite gravely:

“You would find that the younger of my sappers shared your views. *They* would understand you! ‘Thirty-fifth Corps of Engineers, the Front.’”

And she? Well, she burst into tears!

Ah, a glorious time it was! I spent it mostly amongst my flowers.

Every morning would the convolvulus hang out its tiny, polyphonous bells to greet the day, and the sweet pea—a tendrilled, clinging, domestic plant that, after unfurling painted, pavilion-like blooms like butterflies, hangs dreaming on its supports—nod in the sunlight, and the nasturtium flare its watch-fires, its never-quenched burning-ghaunts, from dawn till dusk, and the stock rest the eyes with virginal whiteness, and the mignonette

suffuse the garden with an intangible perfume as of muted music.

In passing, how little have men yet come to know of flowers—of their mysterious language, of their souls! For example, has it never struck you how like to an organ's pealing is the sound of the dahlia's velvety bloom, and how poppies seem to ring with sunlight, and marguerites to lisp like children?

And to the swallows as they flew past me, and to the butterflies as they hovered over the flowers, and to the columns of midges as they danced in the sunshine I would blow kisses. And then there were my kindly pallets to tend—buff-coloured, restful-looking cochin chinās which respected themselves as ladies in feathers, and, incidentally, provided me with splendid eggs. As for the cock, a bird of exceedingly well-balanced mind, I would discuss with him the philosophy of life. And he would say in his civil way:

“My friend, all things pass. All things are but vanity.”

And then there were my beloved, introspective turkeys—birds which, scanning the heavens with glassy eyes and tip-tilted heads,

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would seem to be saying to one another: "Is it going to rain?"

In short, I came to know all the secrets of this interesting little community: I became familiar with its simple habits and sunlit joys, and able to appreciate its mystical awe of twilight when it both desires and fears to surrender itself to the night season, and stretches forth inquisitive necks into the darkness.

Ah, the comfort, the comfort and delight, that such a community can afford to its friend man!

By this time it was only with horror that I recalled the yellings, the shriekings, at the Front; the reek of ripped-up bellies (b-r-r-rh!); the turmoil of the mob of orang-outangs; the bestial stench of sweat; the snivellings of snotty noses; the zoological "body searchings."

To the turkey cock, as he eyed me, I would say:

"Of what, brother, art thou thinking? Of M-A-N? Does that sound to you so *very* splendid?"

And with bristling feathers and empurpled face he would trail his wing tips upon the ground, revolve as though mounted on castors, and cry:

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"See, rather! This, if you like, is splendid!"

The dear, conceited fellow!

Yes, I used actually to kiss those poultry heads with their transverse eyes, their brains free from all base thoughts, their minds all cognisant of life's inwardness, yet all mutually differing from one another. The very odour of them was preferable to the odour of your Bergson.

Affectionately, too, would I eye the dappled calf when nightfall had arrived, and she had retired to a knoll to meditate over a well-tightened stomach. Thoughtfully she would contemplate the fast-darkening fields, as though saying with eyes of timid perplexity: "Is this night, if you please? Is this night, if you please?" And at length an infantile piping would voice her apprehension of the gloom.

And to that the voice of the evening good-wife would be heard responding:

"Miliusha, Miliusha, Miliusha! What ails thee, then? Come! Be not thou so fearful."

And through an instinct I would know that a human caress and an animal caper had united the pair in a bond of sympathy.

But in time the end came. I received

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orders to "carry on," and was told that, my nerves having recovered themselves, I was able once again to do a good day's work.

Ah, that I could then have become a little robin redbreast, owner of a marvellous little dwelling in some old lime-tree, of a dwelling furnished with electric light against the July nights when the sky plays games of ball with pood-weight spheres! Why was it that I could not roam the garden on noiseless wings, and, perching upon the jasmine, inquire of the dim man at the window above:

"Ya-né-ta-ka-ya? Ya-né-ta-ka-ya?"¹

In deep distress I took my leave. To the barn-door cock I confessed that I now shared his philosophy to the full, since, verily, all things did pass. And to the calf I tendered the advice that she should overcome her fear of night-darkened fields, and grow up into a mass of milk. And to all of these I threw a repletion of peas and grain as I whispered to the sun: "Take care of these my little ones!"

Equally to the soon-to-be-orphaned flowers

¹ "Surely I am not as thou? Surely I am not as thou?" The translator has retained the Russian in the text in order to preserve the author's beautiful onomatopœic imitation of the robin's call.

did I speak a few kind words as shamefacedly I concealed my idiotic sword beneath my cloak. Lastly I cried:

"Farewell, ye placid heavens, and farewell, thou great, untrammelled sun that goest to thy couch behind the forest!"

Ah, and who else was calling me—who? Why, little robin redbreast!

"Happy one, mayest thou live for ever in peace!"

Finally I was speeded on my way by a glance from the knowing, melancholy eyes of "Old Woman," of "Matrona," the mare with the pendent lip. She seemed to be saying:

"Ah, the folly of it! Stay here with us, and we will eat of sorrel stalks, and dream sweet dreams."

And what, think you, did I reply to the wise old mare? Planting myself firmly in the tarantass, I said to her from behind Anton's stiff back:

"Madame, not yet have I attained to your condition of freedom. Rather, I am departing in the fear of death, in the fear of the pains of death. Yet I intend to leap to the grapple with them. And though I know that you

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cannot understand these words, at least they *sound* well."

Even now I need but close my eyes to hear, once again, the mare champing her juicy fodder, and snorting with satisfaction; the tarantass creaking on its wheels; the cock crowing to me a last farewell. And oh, the clouds that were hanging over my head, clouds edged with pink and gold! And oh, the long avenue of lime-trees patched with dozing shadows of the previous night! What a dawn of dawns was that daybreak! . . .

And to those things there was to be no return!..

II

ONCE again grinding wheels; human whirlpools at rest-stations; kitbags; kettles; bayonets; yellings; the never-silent shuffling of myriads of feet, all seeking the right way; dirty tumblers on sticky tables; women with wanton, solicitous eyes, and blood-red lips like the lips of rag-dolls; nights spent on benches to the strains of gramophones, the neighing of young mules, and the wailing of distracted *babwi*¹; field hospitals with stretchers and burial shells; disputes with transport officers at cross-points; Cossacks with looted carpets over their arms, and, perhaps, a round-bellied pink vase thrust under the crupper straps along with the ration of hay; station staff-officers half-torn to pieces, but insistently consigning everyone to the devil's mother:—in short, the whole trough-and-crest of a great human inundation.

But gradually the smell of the blood-soaked fields penetrated to my vitals, and

¹ Peasant women.

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revived ~~my~~ erstwhile slumbering virility—caused it once more to become vocal, vociferous. Indeed, as I remembered the twittering canary-bird I regretted that even she was not with me! And thus the tidal wave of the bloody contest lifted me up, bespattered me—and let me gently down into its trough. . . .

I fetched up in a pleasure-garden, where I was walking under dusty acacia-trees which imperfectly served to conceal the nude shamelessness of a swarthy Oriental lady. A moment ago the lady had descended from a box-and-barrel-built platform on which she had been stuffing herself with “snake poison,” and intermittently passing a greasy, Indian-bangled arm round the gaping jaws of a ruffed tiger in a cage. Yet I found myself smiling at some tatterdemalion fiddlers in red tailcoats (coats which made one itch to look at them!) as a man might smile at the sunshine after recovering from an illness! And after having drinks with a rascal of a manager whose lips were redolent of garlic and eau-de-cologne, and suspiciously blue, I was taken in hand by some other members of the staff, and, in particular, by a Jew who, for some reason

or another, called himself "Michel *and* Angelo," and could smoke through his nostrils, relate anecdotes effectively, and deal himself four aces at a throw.

Yet there was a dizziness upon me, and a mortal weariness. Whence that weariness? From time to time I would inquire of the heavens, "How are my ladies in feathers faring?" and realise to the point of tears that I was yearning to exchange a word with the cock.

Suddenly there flared up in me an all-consuming idea, an idea which rent the rest of my stale, mouldering thoughts to tatters. And into the jowls of those creatures that were lapping up beer and Bessarabian wine I flung:

"Grunt away, hogs, or go down upon all-fours, and bellow, or bark! But at all costs cease from your playing at being men, lest reason break its bonds and run *amok*—that reason which can shrivel and destroy everything!"

Yet not even reason could have shrivelled those fellows and their pleasure-garden. All that they did was to clap me cheerfully upon the shoulder, clink glasses with me in toper

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fashion, wipe perspiring brows, and say with a yawn:

.. "We are going to have a thunderstorm. Should you like to see a few nice dancing-girls?"

I gazed at the grey, starless firmament, and replied that I should prefer another anecdote.

Later on, for the benefit of the lady tiger tamer, I purchased from a gipsy scoundrel a large silver and ivory crucifix which must have lain for centuries in some ancestral coffin, and, until ravished by the hand of war, basked in the prayerful light of a Polish beauty's eyes, and been fanned with her brilliant, scented locks. 'Yet what, what under my very nose, must "Mamselle Lulu," that shameless human machine, that creature born in corruption, that creature smiling the smile of a drunken minx, do but proceed to use my present as a nutcracker!

Well, in spite of her conduct, the fact that the Front was imminent led me to search in myself for, and at length to discover, a few remnants of my religious faith; so that I who had rent men into fragments, and now was feeling boundlessly exasperated and upset

with "Mamselle Tulu," confined myself to overwhelming her with soldier-like reproaches, tearing the crucifix from her hands, and presenting it, presenting *Him*, to—the dirty-nosed daughter of the pleasure-garden's proprietor!

Of the sequel, of the reconciliation, of the discovery that the "tiger" was only a barber's foreman from Tchernovitz—the story of the sequel would be, in the telling, a mere tale of folly enacted upon a dead tiger-skin amid a setting of resinous-smelling bottles of "snake poison." The sequel was but a delirious, counterfeit assertion of my slain right to live. That was all that it represented.

Yet that right to live; what was it worth? Rather had the orgy been a preparation for the grievous burden of war, for (not impossibly) a repetition of my "tomb." For the foam of the billow had not yet subsided. To the Front seventy versts still needed to be covered. On my sending a message to the rest-station that Sashka, my rascal of a chauffeur, should bring round the car, he arrived with the cheerful tidings that the Germans had dug themselves in on the scene of my late "tomb," and fallen to delivering "pushes," and to hurling

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"paving-stones," and that yesterday they had even decimated my own "Sevenths" with an aeroplane bomb.

"So we must go and kill them," said Sashka the red-faced, the full-fed, as he fumbled in his rear for his lollipops.

Always the sight of his strong, invincibly assured neck filled me with confidence.

"Not if it depends upon you alone," I remarked.

"Yes, even if it depends upon me alone," he replied. "In-dif-fer-ent-o!"

So we started.

Shortly before reaching the turning to B. Sashka began to fidget about on his posterior, and to twitch cheekbones the splendid glossiness of which surpassed even the stubbornness of his neck. And thereafter we drove more quietly, and with a rhythm more restrained. And then the car took to snorting, and Sashka to cursing the oil, the petrol, and the magneto, and to sweating from the back of his neck (from the mirror of his soul), and to twitching his cheekbones with absolute violence.

What could be the matter?

Just as we reached the turning the car growled and subsided. Sashka leapt down,

and dived beneath the bonnet. Thence he explained that, inasmuch as at the last halting-place we had forgotten to indent for spare portions, we now needed a "remount." Prone under the machine, he grunted, tapped hither and thither with a crank, and snuffled loudly.

Now, I happened to know that he had a particular desire to make a deviation to B. And I happened to know that the reason for that desire was the fact that there was waiting for him there a fancy girl. From our present position the distance to the town was thirty versts; and the town lay off the main road. Yet also it happened that I too felt drawn towards B.; I felt drawn towards the comfortable retreat owned there by a friend of mine, the local Collector—a bachelor, and my senior by some twenty years. For I knew that in his retreat I should be able to fall asleep on a Turkish divan under a picture of "A Pasha with a Narghile," and to consume Lithuanian ham and custards and fritters, and to drink old vodka "come from the cellars of Poniatowski himself," and to smooth with my fingers a sweating, pot-bellied flagon of the balsam-and-honey liqueur which represented the famous "infants' breath," and

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could evoke mist-wrapped dreams, and open up to one the portals of another world. Also I knew that the Collector would be sure to have a calf killed, and to bid Zosika souse the cutlets thoroughly in cream before stewing them with walnuts.

I glanced at the landscape. Towards the Front there lay but a far-flung plain and a hazy blue forest. Oak-trees. . . . A despondency was upon me like a foretaste of the dance of death. A solitary Farman, remote, unheard, was hovering over the country like a raven. Suddenly a little bird inquired of me from a bush:

“Ya-né-ta-ka-ya? Ya-né-ta-ka-ya?”

“Nay, indeed thou art not!”

My thoughts began more and more wearily to turn towards a place of comfort. Gladly I would bury my head beneath the white counterpane of a Collector's luxury: gladly I would fill myself up with “infants' breath,” and subside into Nirvana.

And before me flitted thoughts also of the Collector's bathroom (you should have seen it in the old days!), and of soft Angora rabbit-skin slippers in which I could wander a day, for two whole days, as I issued on to

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the verandah to summon the rabbits and guinea-fowls, and feed them with golden peameal.

Or even to be on a desert island! For there, even, would there be rest and peace! . . .

"The machine is near breaking down," remarked Sashka. . . .

Ah, he had known of my vacillations at that turning! . . .

"Then how about going back?"

He worked away with the air-pump. He became wholly absorbed. Yet his cheekbones were twitching.

"In-dif-fer-ent-o!"

"To B., then!"

The car became a whirlwind. It roared and cleft the air. Verst stones fell away behind us; volleys of road ballast were discharged; the pimples danced behind my chauffeur's ears; the machine chattered and sang of speed; its metal hummed in the hurricane draught.

III

ARRIVED at the Collector's, I found my head buzz and swim with the exoticism of the place.

Imagine it! Stuffed into that one dull little Lithuanian town there were Italy and Greece and the Argentine! And Turkey too—over a tobacconist's shop, and on the sign-board of some rascal of a painter! And Jamaica as well—on a bottle of rum! And the old vodka! And the “infants' breath”!

From fragments children can fashion whole costumes for stories, and the frailty of the human machine is such that hashish can enable men to envisage Arabian tales in a cesspool. But what force of magic had enabled our Collector from Perm to conjure from a bottle of vodka the trio of seedy-looking, raffish, second-hand aliens whom I found in his dwelling?

My head whirled. A strange tongue was I hearing; a tongue *cantabile* of diction, and guttural of *timbre*! Had the place become a travelling circus? Or had an Indian fakir

dragged slow steps from the East for the express purpose of revealing to the little town the future, and tearing aside the forbidden curtain?

And oh, the faces that flitted before my eyes! They danced before me as in a nightmare as alternately they swelled and collapsed and dissolved into grins like the grins of dressed-up apes with snapping jaws.

Yet this was not delirium. It was reality. And as I caught once more the smell of the human stable, the pungent, sweaty odour of the humanised gorilla-dog, I caught also a perfume, faint, but overpowering, of bananas and vanilla.

Then who were these people? And what their names? Were they Poles or——? At all events there seemed to be an Italian. Yes. A Signor Cazalini. And without an Italianess? *Most* remarkable! Before me there arose the Eternal City, the Vatican Gardens, the Colosseum, Trajan's Forum, the Baths of Caracalla, pine-wreaths, archways, aqueducts, pillared temples, and the Fortress-Tower of San Angelo. And all from a single red cravat, grease-spotted and fastened with a green beetle tie-pin, and from a single thick, crooked

nose, black, stubbly moustache, and set of pimply, hirsute, brown-shagreen features! Similarly the eyes, with whites exuding blue, viscous drops, besprinkled me with the veritable ultramarine billows of an Italian sea, and the check waistcoat of mulberry-coloured velvet, with the inevitable panorama-trinket, suffused me with the veritable scent of the Neapolitan foreshore—the scent compounded equally of musty wine, of rancid butter, and of over-ripe orange!

You will think that this was fancy? But do you not know the currents to be encountered in the *coupon-lits* of express trains, where only the cream of humanity rubs shoulders together, and there is an atmosphere compounded of well-dressed women temporarily modulated into a spiritual symphony of Paris-London, and of intangible emanations from diamonds, *beaux yeux*, refined, melodious speech, dead roses, pineapple, chocolate, chablis, champagne, chambertin, and superfine cigarette—the whole fused into the incommunicable *bouquet* which is the *bouquet* of human super-excellence, but also has in it, and is for ever being impregnated from, the incommunicable *bouquet* of human corruption?

And there seemed to be a Greek, too. ,Yes. Trampling about the room with muffled tread and pendent moustache, a /moustache not wholly untouched by time, he introduced himself as a ventriloquist and a purveyor of Turkish delight for the Front. From the ceiling a voice said: .

“Go-o-od evening!”

Then, thrusting at me a pair of protuberant, olive-oilish eyes, and inflating a pair of concave cheeks, he said through splutterings of pistachio nut: .

“You likee bre-e-celliants?”¹

The voice, thin and squeaky, came from flabby lips stuffed with pistachio nut and salad.

I “likee,” indeed!

Lastly, an Argentinian lady—truly a splendid specimen of the human she!

Tall, ample of bust, slender of waist, broad of hips, tapering below them, she was upright, black-avised, copper-haired, button-nosed, and voracious and predatory of eye. Also she had some tiny moles and hairs set just in the right places.

But that little button of a nose! Who would have thought that from such a button

¹ Apparently a kind of sweetmeat.

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There was dangling the end of such a tangled skein? Only later will you understand this. For the moment suffice it that the great enchantress, Life, is immeasurably richer in incident even than the wildest fancy. Never ought one to say that a given thing could never happen. Anything may happen. I who speak know.

Ah, that Argentinian lady with the white column of a neck—the neck powdered with pink and gold, and set amid soft folds of velvety flesh, and laced about with corals and gilt beads, and finished with a tiny emerald cross upon the décolletage of a silken gown!

As she walked she kicked to and fro, daintily, playfully, a long, black, silken train. On her head a cartwheel hat sent a sultana-like ostrich feather dangling over eyebrows and eyelashes made for dreaming.

And she would say at intervals—rather, she would sing:

“O caballero; O cabaiero!”¹

And the lilt of those captivating words, the manner in which they flashed their way to my nervous system, I could never adequately

¹ Spanish for “sir” or “gentleman.” “Cabaiero” is an affected corruption of the same word.

describe. Ah, she knew *how* to utter them! Even the elderly Collector, swallowing his *ennui*, wheezed into my ear: :

"She, she—no, I simply cannot help it—she just *tickles* me. 'Q cabai-ai-lero!'"

Yes, just those two words, and their accompanying laughter—laughter as delicate and clear-ringing as fine silver, but slightly hoarse. Yet no; not hoarse. The truth is that our language contains no word capable of describing the intimately suggestive laugh of such a human she as that woman. Her rings, the glittering armament of her fingers, seemed to be laughing rather than she. From her, too, it was that there was coming the scent of bananas and vanilla which I had from the first detected. Moist and warm, the scent came blowing from her as from a lagoon super-heated under a super-scorching sun.

And these people's faces danced before me as in a haze. Yet it cannot be that the faces were merely phantoms. See here. Do you see that scratch, that whitish scar, on my hand? Well, *she* did that; she did it as, playing with the hand, she jestingly scratched upon it a comma with her finger-ring. Then she clasped the hand and cried;

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“O caballero! O cabaiero!!”

‘ Yes, the woman herself made that mark. She made it along with a venomous compressing of her splendid lips.

Ah, her be-rouge’d lips, contorted with tenderness! Ah, her concentric folds of velvety neck! She was a true serpent battenning upon blood!

Romance? Well, wait and see.

Whence these people? And what their purpose?

The whence does not matter. War never fails to shake out humanity’s folds, and collect together much human dust.

In passing, were ever so many hideous expressions, and abominable human nick-names, known as during this war? I myself used to be acquainted with a man who signed himself “Kill!” and appended to the signature the most ornate of flourishes. And at different times I have encountered men known as “Snake,” “Son of a Snake,” “Nit,” “Snot,” and “God’s Spittle”!

I am not inventing. I am but speaking within my knowledge.

Who, then, were these people? And what their purpose?

The Collector's bald pate fairly gleamed as he replied:

"My friend, I love oddities, and when, yesterday, these folk turned up with the remark that they would rent my front rooms for a week, and that their purpose was to give demonstrations of—of—of the cab-al-ist-ic art, I had their baggage stowed away for them. Interesting folk they are—and each of them from a different quarter of the world! 'O cabai-ai-lero!' Just so."

But who, in particular, was the copper-tressed Argentinian with the predatory eyes, and the teeth like fine pearls, and—she an Argentinian!—the little button for a nose?¹

"Who?" repeated the Collector. "Why, a fortune teller."

"A fortune teller? Then probably she knows how the war will end?"

"Yes, she *does* know a thing or two," replied the Collector with an expressive smack of the lips. "When she arrived she simply turned my brain to mush as she fastened, glued, herself upon me and said: 'I *am* so tired, and your place *does* look so restful!'

¹ A facial feature distinctively Slavonic.

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No, she doesn't understand much Russian, except thus—on the fingers. But she can put some liquor away! And how bewitchingly she says, 'O cabaiero!' P-p-phew! Just so."

In fact, the Collector was strutting about like a cock, and actually smelling of attar of roses! And as he showed his guests his bins of Permian wine he related disconnected tales of Siberian gold and Uralian gems. Then, seizing the Argentinian by the jewelled fingers, he cried:

"Come, Madame Cabailero! Come, let us search for gold, and go and buy ermines at Irbit.¹ Phew! Just so."

"O caballero! O cabaiero!"

Thenceforth things passed in a whirl. One day elapsed, and two days: and ever I was in a mist. The foreigners stayed where they were. Or did they depart and return? I do not know. I only know that I had my bottle of old vodka of the "superfine *bouquet*," and that the bottle cleared my eyes until I could see for immense distances. With the vodka came shadinesses and moistnesses of oaken forests, and tangled brakes, and ancient castles,

¹ In Imperial days the principal centre of the Russian fur market.

and hunt feasts of nobles, and hand-linked bebies of maidens, and Tyrian bowls, and challenges blown on long horns, and burning-ghauts set amid blacknesses of night, and gold-embroidered jerkins, and be-feathered and be-jewelled casques, and music.

Yes—and *she*.

The Collector would say:

“Play away, Yashka! , Play your very liveliest!” .

And the musicians, sitting in a corner, would be the same as had played in the pleasure-garden under the dusty acacia-trees—the very same hobbledehoyes in red tail-coats, and with ears red and prominent with their efforts. Yet was there anything strange in that? In all latitudes the musicians of cafés and houses of entertainment resemble one another, even as do the worn-out jackets of bar-tenders and the tall hats of funeral mutes. They are but the exhalation of a tavern.

“Play away, Moshka! Play away! Play your very liveliest!”

And the musicians would play their very liveliest, and play it to the point of a screech. And the black ostrich feather would go flutter-

ing about under the ceiling, and the Collector's coat begin to belly out into a tail, and the Italian to fidget with his trinket, and display much dirty shirt under a mulberry-coloured waistcoat. The Greek alone would continue to angle for something in his tumbler with his 'moustache.

"Hi-ya!" cried the Argentinian lady with a gipsyish squeal as the Collector—a Collector no longer, but a panting feather-bed—collapsed on to a sofa.

"P-p-phew! Just so," he gasped. "Scrape away, you fiddlers. Scrape us 'The Maize.'"

And again the fiddlers scraped: this time to a measure that transported the soul to regions not of earth. On the languorous strains of that measure, of "The Young Maize," everything seemed to quiver and float.

Do you know the dance in question, with its reek of decadent passion? It is the dance of a jaded lust no longer desirous of attainment; the dance of a flesh which, after tasting of all things, longs only for death as a refreshment; a dance of serpents twining over a corpse; a foul capering of impotent,

but unquenched, concupiscence; the exhausted baying of all the naked human herd of males and females.

And those alien vipers danced it as though swooning with delight. Of course, *now* I know what it was that was worrying me then—that was tearing at me, and constantly whispering into my ear, “Get ready! Something is about to happen!” But at the time that something lay hidden beneath outward semblances. . . . Yet even then I knew what that something was. I knew it even as I joined the bald-headed Collector in shouting:

“Go it! B-b-bravo!”

The Argentinian lady became entwined with the Italian gentleman, and serpentine in a tango the languorous caress of which was as the caress of death. The voluptuous loathsomeness of that tango! It tortured me to the point of fainting. I closed the eyes that were tempting me so; I strove to forget the present; I struggled to lose myself elsewhere. And lose myself elsewhere I did. Into the range of my consciousness there came floating, borne on those haunting strains, a vision.

In the vision the atmosphere was stifling. Everywhere hung a smell as of heated lagoon,

slime, and orange peel. Palm-trees soared, liana-swathed, aloft. Bananas hung in clusters as large as boats. All the night was steaming, oppressive with the rotting of vegetation. The scene was the tropical Argentine. Troops of strange-looking men were present—owners of myriad-headed herds; and from these came the ordure-like smell of the plains. And on their fingers were dazzling corundum nuggets, and diamonds as large as lentils. In the red cravat of one in particular was an emerald like a snake's eye. And their Havana cigars made red, glowing sparks as the men walked about in top-hats, and with an important air, under trees studded with electric bulbs that looked like globes of pearl. They were men of the thick-lipped or negroid type, men uniformly dressed in white flannel, and bearing flame-coloured roses in their button-holes, and balancing gilt-topped canes. And as they walked about they glanced hither and thither with furtive eyes and a smell of cigars and the circus ring. Each was thinking to himself his private, gross night thoughts. And there were thousands and thousands of Argentinian women; women swarming under the milk-white globes, and coiling themselves

around the thick-lipped, negroid men, and pressing their bosoms to theirs, and languishingly eyeing their diamonds, and lashing them with their silken tresses, and suffusing them with the odour of banana and vanilla.

Such the vision: a vision as of a seed of apes; a vision as of a veritable "Spittle of God."

"O caballero! O cabaiero!"

Ah! It had been a dream, then. Good old vodka!

Yet had it been the vodka, or had it been the liqueur from the sealed flagon, the "infants' breath," that had transported to the Collector's humdrum, red-carpeted *salon* a *cis*-Atlantic Argentine complete with fireflies humming their "Pff-pff-pff!" of amorous passion? Had the vision been more than the coloured crystals and kaleidoscopic splinters and other gorgeous inventions of an intoxicated brain?

"Close the sockets of sober, decent life!" I shouted. "It is gazing upon me with eyes of blood!"

"Play away, Josika! Play away! play your very liveliest!"

"Close the sockets!" again I cried with a sharp, ringing cry.

Upon my mouth there pressed themselves scented, ringed fingers, and someone murmured:

“O caballero! O cabaiero!”

The gaze of the Argentinian woman, rather, the Argentinian shark, drew me into her very being as, eyeing me like a dogfish, and grinning at me with nail-like teeth, she seemed to plunge her jaws into my very blood. Yet oh, those alluring eyes like depths of green sea! Oh, that satiny bosom! Oh, that velvety neck! “Scrunch me, saw me in two, with your ivory saw!”

“Fi-i-ine bre-e-eelliants,” said a voice from the ceiling.

Nay, from the highest heavens! Why, it was our lethargic friend the ventriloquist! What a delightful person! Quite the uncle of vaudeville! And I could see the Italian’s eyes aflame, and his hairy fingers twisting. Oh ho! Then was he jealous? This was interesting. Othello in a striped waistcoat and a vulgar little panorama-trinket!—Then who was *she*? From what play or repertory did *she* derive? Was she Carmen? Juliet? Desdemona? Or, to seek further amongst world-wide celebrities, fair Helen? Marguerite?—No, damn it! She

was all of these in one, all of these in one! She was a type of the world's femininity continued for a thousand years into—well, into this woman of the Argentine.

But when I told her this, and added that she reminded me also of Cleopatra, of Juno, of Beatrice, even of Minerva, she replied that she knew none of those persons! What modesty! An *artiste*, and she knew not Beatrice! Then we would do better. The *naïvetés* of the past should be relegated to the kestrel poets, who had laid upon Penelope's suitors terms of years, and from the first blathered about "love until death," and left out of account the influence of corundum nuggets and emeralds and bananas and vanilla perfume. Aye, the miserable insects had never really known the extent to which the human stable can stink!

This tirade caused my fair Jeanne d'Arc to relapse into uproarious merriment. So I had blundered? Next time I said that her charms were so omnipotent that she might well accomplish with them feats like Judith's or Monna Vanna's, and vanquish all the warlike implements of the world. But alas, added I, she was not of Russian blood! And

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alas, I was not a poet to indite to her a supreme ode!

This time her laughter was truly marvellous, although to myself my language had seemed as heroic as her person had seemed to me beautiful.

Then I drank. I clinked glasses with her, and with the Greek, and with Signor Cazalini. Were we not brothers? Were we not contending with a common hand for the truth?

Then the Collector houted wheezily:

"Come, come, Capain! Away with that piece of antimony and hair-oil. It is time for a little money."

His bald pate could be seen flickering about over a table as he huffled a pack of cards. Then what in this place was real, and what illusion? The bald pate was real: it had come from Perr. And the green tablecloth too. But *thesethers—these others?*

A voice said from the clouds:

"You likee bre-e-eelliants?"

And the gold coins by the Collector's elbow—were they too, real, the Collector's own property? And see, the Greek likewise was strewing c's about! Phew, what richness! Surely the *thorge* of Venice must be somewhere

around? What more was needed that he should appear? Yet what did it all mean? Why was the Italian looking at me like a cur, and gnashing his teeth?

“O caballero! O cabaiero!”

Voluptuously did I inhale the Argentinian’s satiny neck, copper-coloured *coiffure*, and shark-like teeth. “Scrunch me, saw me in two, with your bony file!”—

What had I said? Oh, I had merely observed to the Collector that all things were illusion, make-believe, hallucination, vapour, mist. Yes, hallucination, and hallucination, and hallucination.

Everyone laughed, and even the bald-headed old Collector, with the gold pieces being melted from him, was fool enough to join in. And the Greek winked solemnly at the Argentinian as she sat looking at my hand, and drawled:

“Ab-sol-ute-ly genuine bre-e-eelliant.”

Cazalini, for his part, had taken occasion to pass a card or two; and though the Collector had detected the act, he had forborne to lose his temper, but merely tucked his gold more compactly under his elbow, rapped his fist upon the table, and shouted like a gay young spark:

"Play away! Play away! Play your very liveliest!"

And Cazalini likewise had not been put out of countenance. Vodka seemed to have softened all things. He merely said:

"I was not trying to enre-e-eech myself. I was but showing Madame a le-e-eetle tre-eek."

"Who are these people?" I asked myself again. "The old bald-head from Perm is genuine, is one of ourselves. But what of *these others*, of *these others*?"

"Yes," the Collector wheezed, "all things are illusion. Even the war and its horrors are illusion. You got over-frightened in that 'tomb' of yours. Keep drinking and spitting, and don't worry. But, above all things, drink. Am I not right, Madame Cabailero?"

Suddenly someone said:

"It will not be long before the war is over."

Who had said that? The Argentinian? And with such a good Muscovite accent? *What* was she, then? And why was she figuring as a South American with shark's teeth and a scent of bananas and vanilla?

I would brush aside the pretence. Thumping upon the table with my fist, I shouted into the accursed haze:

"Who are you? And why are you on this red carpet and in this dingy little town? Gold and diamonds and emeralds you have: but also you have snake's eyes. To the devil with your Argentine! To the devil with your bananas! There is fraud about."

Everyone laughed once more, and the fair one tickled my neck with her warm, copperish, silken tresses, and whispered passionately:

"O cabaiero!"

And again there gazed upon me, from her sea-green orbs the tropical Argentine, its night mysteries, its flitting fires—fires luring me to an ecstatic doom.

"Gentlemen, de-e-licious is Turkish delight," the Greek remarked. "Though a var be on, all he-ere is qui-iet. And we too are qui-iet."

To which a muffled voice from the firmament added:

"Yes, the va-ar vill soon be over. Pooh!"

And the Greek fell to dreamily twiddling his fingers.

Cazalini also rubbed baboon-like paws together, and ejaculated:

"Pooh! certainly!" and then whistled.

The moment was one of peculiar rapture.

Her eyes, her eyes were pouring upon me all the enchantments of all the women in all the world. At least, that is how, at the moment, I saw her.

And that view, was it a view born of liqueurs doctored by the Fiend, or was it a view representing a tempestuous sweeping back to me of some of the vital force left behind in the "tomb"? Suffice it that the Arch-Tempter had chosen for his lure an Argentinian woman, and that that lure was dissecting me joint by joint, and steeping me in poison. Yet I seemed to detect in her something akin to myself. I seemed to feel her blood tending to flow to mine. And then there arose in me the wild beast. Let her take me whithersoever she would, for she was one capable of amassing all the world's worthless jewels, of rolling all the world's kingdoms in the dust, of soiling and corrupting the world's very God.

Sprightly cried my Argentinian Bacchante:

"Enjoy yourself, *cavalier!* *Trin-travá!*"¹

And even that tavern cry, that boulevard epithet, "*cavalier*," seemed to become, on her lips, love's own whisper. I could have borne to hear it repeated! But there was no

¹ "Damn everything!" or "A fig for everything!"

need for that. For the first time my elemental nature had shown itself. In war alone, or during a revolution, or—when the human female has injected her venom, does that nature become revealed. Certain instincts ought to be suppressed. Otherwise would Heaven itself pass to the Devil. At times man needs to go forth into the wilderness—and to return thence.

“Yes, enjoy yourself!” bawled the maudlin Collector, seizing the lady’s fingers. “She is a sorceress! She pities no one!”

A sorceress? Then had she tried to exercise her spells *over there*, where we had silenced two German batteries, and wiped out three battalions of Bavarian riflemen?

“Hi-ya! Feeling good, eh?”

How her shark’s teeth were a-play!

“Enjoy yourself, *cavalier*! *Trin-travá!*”

“All—of—us—oh, cocks of the walk are we!” shouted the Collector as he swept the gold pieces from the table without so much as counting them. “Now let me invite you to supper. The sun is just rising.”

IV

AND, sure enough, the sun was just topping the garden wall as he ascended from the mist.

"Eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!" How her shark's teeth worked again! And how the Italian gentleman rent flesh with *his* teeth! And how the now galvanised Greek chewed pickled olives! And how cones of wobbly pink jelly went gollopping down throats! And how crystal glassware played in the dawn's roseate light! And how the cocks crowed to all the town!

And how the dogs barked a sudden warning!

"What a yelping noise they are making!" the Collector said uneasily. "Just listen to the brutes! And I seem to hear the sound of wheels. Yes, of wheels."

A boy's tousled head at the window, and a hand flourishing a scrap of paper!

"A telephonigram—the Germans." The boy said no more, but it was as though he had hurled a bomb.

The Collector turned blue, became a sack,

and collapsed into his chair; the foreigners went on stuffing caviare into their mouths as though working with shovels. And I?—Well, had the Germans really broken through the Front? Oh, no! Illusion it was again; hallucination. The boy had been jesting.

Yet the bomb had burst.

The Collector groaned, tore off his collar, and whined:

“The tel—the tele—the telephonigram says: ‘Evacuate at once. Official.’ But I do not understand it. What does it mean?”

Then suddenly, as he was waving the scrap of paper about, and staring at it with his cheeks distended, he shouted with eyeballs almost starting from his head:

“We have been sold! There is treachery about! To hell, to hell, to hell with the brutes! To hell with one and all of them!”

And he flung his napkin straight into the Greek’s face where the latter was sitting staring at him.

“Ha, ha, ha!” The Argentinian lady relapsed into a peal of laughter.

But out of the haze there had come to me a gleam. My animal instinct had begun to divine the truth. And that truth was a truth

touching upon death. Yes, the intuition which long had been tending towards me from the place where men were dancing amid blood had struck home to my heart at last, and I was near to tearing aside the accursed veil, and grasping the phantasmal, the ever-evasive, secret. *She* was the phantom in the case. Of that I felt certain.

"I am drunk, and cannot form a single idea," groaned the Collector as he re-swathed himself in his napkin, and rubbed his eyes. "Captain, what is the meaning of it all?"

Ah, I had now rent the veil aside; I had now grasped fugitive reality.

After emptying a decanterful of water over his head, the Collector flung the decanter out of a window.

"Captain, act!" he shouted. "The Germans are on our heels, and I have in charge some millions of reserve funds."

Fixing my eyes upon those of the Argentinian, I dragged from her the secret. Yes, *I* knew the meaning of that momentarily confounded gaze: and to the three now suspiciously quiet mummers I shouted:

"Your papers!"

But this appeared to be a cry to which they

were well accustomed, for they rose at once with an air compounded of a consciousness of importance and a sense of pity for my *gaucherie*.

And those papers? They were indeed wonderful papers, with seals of every possible kind (including seals of a readily fusible metal, mounted on canvas), and photographic warrants of high guarantee, and special ciphers, and unimpeachable recommendations. For this human scum (or should I say, rather, this human essence?) had had the best of schooling in the *curriculum vitae*, and were heroes, martyrs, ascetics, persons sacrificing themselves—sacrificing themselves *for their country*.

“You?” I shouted to the Italian. “You a citizen of Minsk, and a native of Italy?”

For never could there have existed a more authentic Italian than he, down to the dirty finger-nails which still had clinging to them traces of the macaroni-with-tomatoes which he had cooked in Naples—the Naples situated on the slopes of Monte Calvario, beside the famous Via Roma. Imagine it! Naples, Naples, and nothing else, was in his many-pocketed waistcoat, watch-chain, and vulgar

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panorama-trinket. Do you follow me? And that profile indicative of aristocratic blood? And that resounding name, "Cesare Giuseppe Pallavicini"? Do you follow me, again I ask? -

According to himself, however, he had been a victim of "the accursed Germans," and escaped from their territory like a man risen from the dead, or "from the floating prison at 'Amburg, if the signor pleases." And as regards citizenship, he had been a citizen of Boston—of the Boston situated (do you follow me?) on the *other* side of the Atlantic. Also he was a man who could swallow swords, settle them "in the right place," juggle with knives like a Korean, compound Strasbourg *pâtés*, and serve a dinner *à la mode* in Moscow, or in Naples, or—in Berlin. Once more, do you follow me?

Ah, as sharp as a street mendicant in the middle of a bevy of his fellows was he! And somehow this thick-nosed Italian of the unknown lineage, this citizen of the world at large, frightened me a little. Might he not be a descendant of Brutus, or of Nero, or of Pilate, or of Julius Cæsar? Or might he not have had Garibaldi for a kinsman? This is

a world in which anything may happen, and the human genealogical tree is exceedingly branchy.

As he sat and looked at me I could see his eyes growing dimmer and dimmer with weariness of their thousand years of world-existence. And his cravat too looked weary. And so did his green beetle tiepin.

Ah, a first-rate "armament" had these people had prepared for them, down to a little emerald cross that was "a gift from a Cabinet Minister"! .

And what of the gentleman with the somnolent moustache? Ah, he, if you please, was simpler.

A ventriloquist, and a purveyor of Turkish delight for the Front. More simply? Then a pedlar of sweetmeats. More simply still? Well, who does not know those "bre-e-el-liants"? But he had been other things too. He had been an importer of Gallipoli oil, a builder of temples in Stari Athos, a denizen of the Piræus ("Timos Kyrikthiades"), a respected citizen of Calais (situated on the shores of the English Channel, but a town whence come the famous horses of Normandy, and he had been an expert buyer of horses),

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a respected member of the Chamber of Commerce of Alexandria, a respected member of the Salvation Army in Birmingham, a commercial correspondent of the London *Times*, a—— But no, no! The rest of his credentials I cannot remember.

And the woman, who was bewitching me with her eyes and vanilla perfume? Ah, *she* had devoted her nights to princes.

“A bre-e-eelliant; a pink bre-e-eelliant; a thousand carat, le-e-eeving bre-e-eelliant, eh?”

And Kyrikthiades waggled a finger in her direction.

And certainly she was a first-rate piece of flesh; a daughter of Russia who had pulled on to herself the tegument of a lady of the Argentine. Also, she was a noted *clairvoyante*, and a great *artiste*—one whose business it was to give pleasure to mankind.

“Yes, I come from Tula,” she explained. “But, you see, I *like* saying, ‘O caballero!’ It doesn’t smack so much of the *samovar*.”

“Quite so, señora.”

So it was Tula that had bestowed upon God’s world this delicious *bonbon* flavoured with vanilla!

For a moment the “Tula” shook me a

little and my sense of certainty began to recede.

And the Collector? He too had been shaken, but more by the many seals and commissions "on important business." At all events he was now hitching up his trousers, modulating his voice, and, old fool, even attempting to appear sober! Also he was stuffing the Greek with leg of veal, and expressing regret that he had been unable to play the host as he should have liked to do, "in that, you see, my affairs demand the greatest possible self-denial."

Next, scarcely able to stand on his legs, he clasped me by the hand, and besought me not to desert him "in this desperate crisis." Then he rambled on about deposit funds, reserves, and certain "critical sums" which he had failed to have removed in time. Lastly he fell to fidgiting from room to room, to bullying his clerks as they loaded despatch-boxes and documents on to a cart, and to ringing the bell of a telephone smitten with dumbness.

For myself, I went into the town, and searched for Sashka. But there was no Sashka, and no car. After a while I did succeed in

getting into touch with the nodal point, and was informed by the staff that we were re-treating in *échelon*, and that during the night my corps of sappers had withdrawn to D. No other car was to be procured in the town, and between us and the main road lay only desolation and a factory.

But the little town itself was humming like an upset bee-hive. Two days now since the Germans had broken through; and they could not very well be far off.

So this was not illusion, but, on the contrary, the last foam-flecked dyke against the breakers of blood. Away, then, with the *impedimenta*!

Past our windows came piles of furniture for which some human being seemed still to have a use; squashy feather-beds; tea-urns exulting in the sunshine; glassware laughing aloud; geese cackling (for even in this hour their owners would not give them their liberty); everything proceeding somewhere, to the devil. Women torn from their last packings were weeping as they counted their chattels, or fled with offspring wrapped in odd garments; porridge-bowls sparkling like wave-crests; ironware clashing; wheels

grating; everything either flying or moving or crawling. Only the cows, as beasts of superior intelligence, kept straining backwards with hoofs braced against the stones. And the same thing held good everywhere. A migration of the nations it was. And time that they got used to the business!

The Collector, after loading his cart, continued to stagger about, and groan:

•“Where is that infernal car of yours? Mind you, I have, here, bags containing millions of money, and I could not entrust *them* to the cart.”

The truth is that the old fool was still hanging on by his last screws, whereas I had broken off entirely, and was strangely inert, impersonal, as though ups and downs had ceased to be able to affect me.

“Collector, I do not care.”

Indeed, what *did* it matter where one saw human faces, seeing that, even if one were to become a citizen of Jamaica, or to go and become a Maori, one would still encounter one’s “Tula,” one would still find illusion, illusion to be universal? Even at that moment songsters seemed to be gently chirping to me in terms of reproach:

"Ya-né-ta-ka-ya?"

And my faithful, stay-at-home turkeys were peering at the heavens with glassy eyes as they asked: "Is it going to rain?"

I could have shouted to those foreigners:

"Go and be consumed with showers of brimstone, you spawn of apes!"

Indeed, this human slime, this "spittle of God," had begun to seem to me a stifling incubus. Had the world left in it no more creatures of the cleaner flesh? But that was nonsense, seeing that some day the turn even of such creatures would come, and they too would begin to expand, and to project shark's teeth, and to plunge bony files into one another's throats, and to produce, for their better passage through life, unimpeachable "armaments" and seals devised for whenever seals might be wanted: Yes, all things were foul illusion, covered with a semblance of reality.

"Collector, I do not care."

Yet still the idiot would not be quieted, but kept stamping his feet, shaking his fists, and screaming:

"What of our country? What of *it*? Oh, this is abominable!"

"Country?" I cried. "Country is a mere word, no more—a word existent exclusively in the works of classical authors, and on the lips of poets. And what have you and I to do with poetry? 'Country' is a mere concession to life, and a synonym for 'love unto death.'"

"Yet, you yourself have played the hero—you yourself went and sat in a 'tomb'—for that 'country'? Even though I am drunk, I can realise that it is my duty to—to save these millions for my native land."

"Country? Country? Country?" I cried, almost ready to hit him. "What is 'country,' I repeat? Which of you knows what it is? So far as you are concerned, it is but a word. So be silent about it. Only I know what it is; only I have seen it—yes, *there*, and *there*, and *there*. Ask your friends yonder what 'country' means. Tula stands in the Argentine, and Boston in Minsk, and Naples on the Guadalquivir, and Calais—oh, and Calais stands in Samaria, for all I know."

"You are as drunk as I," the Collector exclaimed with a burst of tears. Then he waved his satchel aloft, and added: "It has all come of that 'infants' breath.' Why should we mind these people? Even if they

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be milords, the fact does not justify you in refusing to start."

Fine "milords" indeed! Why, still they were stuffing themselves with food! And they must have been made of steel to have been so little affected by want of sleep. Presently the Argentinian and the Greek spread a cloth upon their knees, and started to play *vingt-et-un*, whilst the Italian stretched himself upon a sofa, as though he had been in a boarding-house, and lit a Havana.

The Collector gurgled into my ear:

"Then they are no longer mazurka dancers, Captain?"

"No. They have become holders of commissions 'on important business.'"

"But there are commissions and commissions. Something else than that must be toward, or why should they have rented my front rooms?"

"They did that because you are a Government official. It was sound business—*safer*, you understand."

Failing to grasp my meaning, the Collector merely protruded lobsterish eyes. And to think that millions of money had been entrusted to *him*!

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But those millions? Why, it had been those millions that these people had been playing for! And now they had lost! Oh, that was quite clear to me: quite clear.

But I thought I would sound the Collector further. Said I:

"What if those persons are wealthier even than you? What if they are dealing in the ware now most in demand, in *blood*?"

•But again he failed to understand my meaning, and merely protruded lobsterish eyes. Then he said tearfully:

"I can see not only that you are in want of sleep, but also that these people have laid a trap for us by purposely having the car got out of the way. It is a 'bad business.'"

Then, with a nod to the Italian gentleman, he asked:

"Who are you and your friends? Should you like to go and join the Germans, and take another oath of fealty?"

"A-a-ah!" yawned the Italian; whilst the Greek indicated sleepy dissent with the remark:

"We—have—our—instructions."

"Into the cart, Collector!" I cried to that imbecile. "At least save us our millions.

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The car is not going to turn up. For my own part, however, I intend to stay here. I feel indifferent to everything."

And, indeed, I had ceased to feel conscious of a substantive existence. Was not the whole thing a kaleidoscopic arabesque of glass splinters? But I would probe the matter further.

Returning to the sofa, I stretched myself upon it, and beckoned to the Argentinian. Without hesitation she obeyed.

"Well?" she inquired languidly, with a swaying of the bust.

"Beauteous Argentinian," I said (though as I did so I had to suppress an inclination to pull her on to the sofa beside me), "you hail from Tula—Tula is your native town? There can be no doubt of that?"

As I uttered the words I had to master myself again.

"You *are* so silly!" was her drawled rejoinder.

This shattered my self-control, and I shouted:

"Then *which* town do you consider to be your native place?"

"Why, Tula," she responded vexedly.

"To the devil with that game of yours!"

I could scarcely refrain from striking her across her painted, kissable lips. Meanwhile I could see that the bald-headed Collector was leaning in our direction with ears pricked.

Her green, steady eyes stared at me. Nevertheless I warded off their potent onslaught — an onslaught comprising both a self-submissive, passionate caress and a menace of death.

"Oh, I know what I am saying," I continued. "From the first my animal power of scent enabled me to suspect the truth. From the first I would have staked my head that I was right. Yes, that you are selling our country, selling our country, I have no doubt whatsoever." And my voice rose to a shout. "For that I could kill you, and, indeed, *ought* to kill you!"

Yet as I glared into the liquid, greenish eyes they never flinched, they never caught fire, they never went out. They just caressed.

Not a movement followed. The Greek was sleeping off his leg of veal, and the Italian smoking his cigar. So, might it not all be part of a dream, including the words just uttered, the words embodying *that*?

The Collector, for his part, was looking terrified. His mouth was agape, and his gold-filled teeth displayed. And the Argentinian lady? Well, she too was displaying teeth, shark's teeth—but in a smile.

And she rapped out:

“Go to sleep, you naughty boy!”

Impaled upon this spear-point, upon this “Go to sleep, you naughty boy!” I fairly writhed. Was it cynicism on her part, or bravado? And to think that Tula had produced her! Well, she had up-ended me. She had dealt me the knock-out blow with her laughing shark's teeth and venomous eyes.

In my breast, therefore, there was a real stirring again, a real gnawing, of doubt.

Yet I had not been wrong, for in after days I was to see her wailing and writhing beneath the noose, and lashing her silken tail. . . . It did so befall. It did so befall. . . .

But for the moment a renewal of doubt had seized me in its grip, even though in my heart of hearts I knew who these people were—knew who they were as certainly as I knew that the Germans were blowing up the bridges in our rear.

Suddenly the spray from a wave of these

creatures' foulness seemed to catch me; and I cried:

"Away, human carrion!"

She eyed me as coolly as before, and retorted:

"Less noise, please, you naughty boy!"

Why did I not kill her there and then? Partly because I had surging within me the two opposite emotions of carnal desire and mental repulsion. And the force of their contending was such that between them I had become a mere cipher, a thing as bent and broken as a sat-upon hat.

"We are lost!" the Collector bawled. "What is to be done?"

He was now simply magnificent. At one moment, borne upwards on the crest of a foaming wave, he would upbraid the imperturbable foreigners, beat his breast, and fling orders about; and at the next moment he would subside into the trough, collapse into a chair, and fall to polishing his bald pate with his napkin. Also, he had donned his sword and uniform, and clasped his decorations upon his breast, whilst between whiles he would keep hanging his body out of one or another of the windows, as though he had been expecting a sweetheart!

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By this time the little town had grown quieter, and the hour of noon struck. Yet the Collector refused to abandon hope. He packed a basket full of bottles and provisions, and bade Zosika assume charge of his flat. Then he added to his tenants:

"Into your own rooms, please."

Not a finger was stirred, save that the Argentinian remarked:

"Yes, your place shall be looked after, you silly old bald-pate."

Turning tail, the Collector reseated himself, and veiled his bald patch under a napkin. It was as though everything had turned topsyturvy. Soon we should have these people spitting in our faces!

"Get out, swine!" I cried, as I ejected them at the point of the revolver. At least *that* was language which they understood.

Then we listened. The car was coming. Yes, it was grunting with its horn, and coughing its insistent "Klok, klok, klok!"

"We are saved!" the Collector yelled. "Hurrah!"

Sashka drove up to the window, and grunted again with the horn. Then he disclosed to view a round, beetroot-coloured face,

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a cap set on the back of his head, and a breast bearing a buttonhole of jasmine. A bridegroom it was, not a chauffeur! He attempted to justify himself by muttering:

“Beg pardon, y’r Ex’lency! I had to go and evacuate my young woman.”

His young woman! Oh, the broad-skulled knaves of Russia! But never mind. Blushing like a peony he was now: and, in general, he had always been a well-behaved young fellow.

“The Germans are blowing up the bridges,” he added. “We must hurry.”

Hurry being the word, I flung the Collector and his satchel into the car—I bundled them into it as so much clay (and you should have seen the figure cut by the Collector—a be-ribanded bladder in a uniform!). Then I shouted to Sashka:

“Right away! We must do it within an hour.”

And away we went.

V

ONWARD, onward, onward! Hoo, hoo! Klok, klok, klok! Other vehicles flew into the gutter. Cows' tails; bellowings; cursings; dust; a place on fire. Yet ever the stubborn neck, my support and comfort; ever the restful cheekbones. So one might sit still.

A dog yelped, and shot, a mere rag, into the ditch. A load collapsed at a sharp turning. A woman shrieked, and clutched at her child. Yet still the cheekbones in repose, and the neck imperturbably introspective. No change save that the ears had become acutely red.

Onward, onward, onward! Hoo, hoo, ho-o-oo!

The Collector bumped against my hip. With mouth open, and gold teeth loosened with the hurricane draught, he drew down the peak of his cap and gasped: "O Lord, save us!" Then he clutched at my leg, and his face grew blue with the strain.

I, however, felt as though riding upon a frenzied billow. The clanking throb of the metal had cleansed my thoughts of their

dross, and flung it against the verst posts, so that everything seemed clear. A flock at pasture—a flock caring as little for the one side in the war as for the other. The kindly distance, welcoming all with a caress. A birch stump by the roadside, gliding to meet us. Farewell, birch stump, and farewell, old man who art stopping thine ears against our terrible hooting!

• Onward, onward, onward! Hoo, hoo, ho-o-oo!

Soon everything had become left behind, including the drifting population, and before us lay only empty expanses and the untrammelled wind.

But, hullo! Had something gone wrong? Sashka was slackening speed.

Presently he stopped altogether.

What?

As he looked at me I perceived that he was no longer Sashka, but a creature with a grey face that muttered:

“We have nearly finished our petrol.”

Indeed? Well, that meant that the delay in starting had so thrown me out as to cause me to leave behind the reserve can. It was as though something had struck me over the heart!

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"Then we must go back."

"But, we cannot even do that, for already we have come twenty versts, and there is not enough petrol left to do more than another ten! We must obtain a fresh supply somehow."

So the car could not return! What was to be done?

Suddenly the Collector shouted:

"*I have it! I know what! Somewhere about here there stands a hospital. It is down a turning to the left.*"

I eyed him, and saw that he was still drunk—that his eyes were dim and misty. But he repeated his opinion, saying:

"Yes, I am certain that there is a hospital about seven versts away."

Then he grew mixed, and muttered something or another about card-parties at the hospital, and the doctor coming for him thence in a motor-car.

"Well, a track does turn off hereabouts," corroborated Sashka. "And if we go on we shall come to it soon. It turns off into a forest."

"And that is where the hospital will be. Besides, we may find a store in the forest, and

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be able to get a fresh supply of 'whishky' or 'whashky'—whatever you call it."

"Where there is a hospital there will be petrol," remarked Sashka. "But we must hurry, for the Germans have thrown out spies, and at the rest-station the staff told me that a specially important lot has slipped through our fingers."

Suddenly the Collector exclaimed as he clutched me by the shoulder:

"What did I tell you? I told you so! All is as clear as day. And a *very* nice, snug little place for them mine was!"

For myself, however, I felt absolutely indifferent. Long ago I had envisaged the mystery. Besides, what did life, or anything in life, matter? By this time I knew better than to invite further illusion. Let that bald-headed old—

"Away!" he shouted. "We can't stop here, you know."

Sashka eyed me in sombre fashion.

"Very well," I said. "Cut along, and the devil take us."

So we started again. We were in a remote spot where a belt of forest skirted the road. At all costs must petrol be procured.

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At the turning we came upon a verst post, a muddy track trending into forest, and an arrow saying "To Zavilishki."

"Ah! Now I remember the place," the Collector remarked. "This Zavilishki was the place of which I was thinking. It is where the hospital stands."

So we proceeded at a venture. Suppose the hospital had been evacuated? Well, never mind. It would merely mean that the accursed nightmare would have to be prolonged, and that it would acquire a new setting. But the setting immediately impending was this mysterious Zavilishki.

The track ran between rows of pines which, soaring heavenward like masts, were things of absolute beauty. Only at intervals did clearances occur to break the golden obscurity. The place was like a natural park. Oh, that there and then I could have alighted, and wandered and wandered until my faculties had become restored, and I had been free, forgetful of, and indifferent to, all things, to lay myself down in that living temple, and sleep to the tappings of woodpeckers (ah, those red-headed footmen in their funeral cloaks!) where the sun glowed softly screened!

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Everywhere was a warm smell as of incense. Under the vaulted roof an organ seemed to be droning. In the distance bells seemed to be faintly audible. Why had I not come thither sooner, seeing that now it could only be, "Farewell, O ancient pines, and finish your piece, O organ, and a last kiss to you all, for Death is coming your way in flames of fire!"

Aye, how gladly could I have halted there, where the stillness lured my soul with its soothing eyes! Only then did I realise my deadly weariness. Only then did I realise that I was not quite myself. Hungrily I eyed the russet pine-ranks, the lusciously thick moss like cushions of green velvet. The very silence was vocal. Everywhere lay the caress of a great peacefulness. Truly the place was an enchanted forest, the dream kingdom of a fairy-tale!

My companions too sat held in an appreciative mood. Taking off his cap, the Collector said with a sigh:

"By God's will it is that at the end of all things it has been given us to behold such beauty. All my life I have been dreaming of such a forest; and all my life I have been counting up other people's money!"

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By this time we were travelling more gently, for the track seemed to be studded with holes. Everywhere was a coolness, a freshness.

"Klok, klok, klok!" shouted Sashka's engine. And at the sound the mysteries, the profundities, of the forest seemed to give a start, and uneasiness to glide among the pines. Involuntarily, as though both the Collector and I had been hurt, we exclaimed:

"There is no need for that!"

And silence fell again—a sense of mystery—an air of secretiveness. A mountain ash, flaming in a sunbeam! The forest's smile. A sudden breath of dryness! The passage of a ravine.

"A man beside the road!"

Yet we had no time to investigate; we hurried on. True, the man might have been interrogated, but the hours would not halt, and there was still the unknown to be explored.

Presently, however, halt we did—Sashka pulled up sharply, too.

For we had encountered a newly-dug trench across the track, and a verst post beside it, bearing, under the usual official notice of "Hunting Prohibited," a scrap of paper.

Lest we should injure the car, we alighted,

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and I deciphered on the scrap of paper the letters "O.L." boldly scrawled in india ink, over, in smaller characters, the legend:

"In virtue of code O.L. I herewith prohibit traffic beyond this point. Colonel——" And the signature tailed away into a meaningless flourish. .

"What can the letters 'O.L.' stand for?" I queried of the impersonal signature.

"Probably for 'Okruzhnõe Liesnichestvo,' "¹ replied the Collector. "Or for 'Okruzhnõe Lazaret.' "²

"But such institutions as the last no longer exist!" .

Suddenly the Collector gasped in a queer way, as though someone had pinched him, and, pointing with a finger, exclaimed:

"Do you see that crescent at the head of the paper?" .

Sure enough, the document was headed with a half-moon boldly executed, like the letters, in india ink.

The collector's lips quivered: and as he stared at me he whispered in almost inaudible tones:

¹ District Conservancy of Forests.

² District Leper Hospital.

"There must be Turks about, Captain, come with the Germans. And this Colonel Somebody must be their commander. We are prisoners, then. There cannot be a doubt of it."

And he subsided against the verst post in a state bordering upon tears.

"I will not go another step," he protested hysterically. "It is not about myself that I am worrying, but about my duties; for Government money is in my charge, and I am responsible for its safety. That money must at all costs be concealed."

The old fool irritated me; and though he looked at me as though cherishing a hope that I might be able to find a way out of the difficulty, I felt merely relieved, merely, in a strange sort of way, as though I were at home in the place. Yes, the tide of illusion was returning upon me, and the enchanted forest beginning to give up its secrets. I felt as though I were in a continuation of the dream begun with the stoppage of my real life during those terrible days and nights in the "tomb," and that I was no longer myself. Then who, in that case, was I? All that I knew about it was that my true self had ceased to exist when I had fallen prone be-

neath the beams in the place where men had been dancing amongst bloodshed and turmoil.

"Give me your opinion, Collector," I said. "Am I really myself? What is happening to me I cannot imagine."

He eyed me wildly.

"You are not grasping the situation," he said. "People who play the fool never accomplish anything. What we need to do is to get clear of this. Hitherto I had believed you to be a man of resource: I had had every confidence in you."

The result of this tone of trustfulness was that I pulled myself together, and felt myself return to real life.

"Hence, accursed 'obsessions!' I cried. "The present only is life, is actuality. What have mysteries to do with me?"

And I added:

"Cheer up, Collector! Phantasmal existences, phantasmal mysteries, are the thing which is not: whereas reality is absolutely simple, and consistently sordid. Damn it, what is the mystery in the present case? See for yourself. The scrawl with its flourishes is only the official ideal, bureaucracy itself. Why, I can picture the very jowl of the clerk

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who wrote the thing, with its pimply features and crooked hair-parting. Nothing could be 'more' real than this document. Look at that 'Colonel' amid its inflated loops intended to show respect for the Government. And the 'crescent' on the paper is only a sickle, a *jeu d'esprit*."

"All of which may be true," the Collector faintly responded. "Yet personally my preference is for making ourselves scarce. At the same time, *what* do you think the letters 'O.L.' represent?"

"Why bother about them? They might represent 'Okhrana Liezov,'¹ 'Okruzhnoe Liesnichestvo'²—or even 'Osel Lisii.'³ And in any case, what have we to lose?"

"The Government's millions," was the Collector's stern retort. "But I suppose *they* don't matter!"

A waggish mood came upon me. I seized the old fellow by the arm, and dragged him to the car.

"All this is a dream, a dream," I said. "Come forth, ye forest mysteries, and show yourselves!—Right away, Sashka."

¹ Forestal Police.

² District Conservancy of Forests.

³ Bald-headed Ass.

And we re-started. But now Sashka drove with ever-increasing hesitation, and with a zig-zag course, for the track seemed to have been cut about on purpose. Here we encountered a stump; there a roof-slat; there a hole. And all the while did my chauffeur grumble, and the back of his neck perspire. Suddenly he halted again. Across the track there was stretched a rope! And across the rope there was stretched a piece of sheeting marked "P.G."!

Sashka eyed me with his cheekbones twitching. What could the thing mean? But this time its meaning appeared to be clear enough, and the Collector shouted triumphantly:

"Why, it is the white flag! The hospital people failed to be evacuated in time, and are giving everyone notice not to fire. Of course, a Red Cross *would* have been better, but at least the letters 'P.G.' cannot stand for anything in the world save *Polevoi Gosptal.*"

To which Sashka added:

"If we get our petrol here, we shall be at the nodal point in half an hour. And here it is—that hospital!"

¹ Field Hospital. The Russian alphabet contains no equivalent to the letter H: wherefore in words borrowed from foreign languages H is represented by the Russian G.

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The forest opened out, and I saw ahead of us a pair of tall, dingy gates, flanked by stone pillars bearing bronze urns, and guarded by two sentries.

For the rest, only silence—somnolence. An enchanted castle, without doubt.

Just as Sashka was pulling up, the Collector seized me by the hand, and exclaimed:

“*Lunae*? What does *Lunae* mean? O Lord, what does it mean?”

I peered forward, but failed to understand him. All that I could see was a white sheet suspended, placard-wise, from the dingy gates. Again the Collector plucked at my hand, and shouted, almost beside himself:

“Is that thing *Lunae*, or is it not? *What* is it?”

And though too near-sighted to distinguish any detail of what he meant, I gathered from his tone that this time before us lay something unusual. Presently I heard Sashka spelling out:

“D-e-p-a-r-t-m-e-n-t *L-u-n-a-e*.”

After which he fixed me with a glassy stare, as though to ask what the thing meant.

Ah, my accursed obsessions! To the devil, to the devil, with them! Was not this a madman’s jest?

Authoritatively I shouted:

“Open the gates!”

Not a movement followed: the sentries stood like stones. Then Sashka sounded his horn—blared away into the pine-trees, and also set the engine a-throbbing. But still the sentries remained like dead men. Plainly the place was an enchanted castle.

At length I shouted to Sashka, “Go ahead,” and at the same time felt for my revolver, in case it should be wanted. But, damnation! I had left it behind me, on the sofa at the Collector’s! Oh, the devil! Oh, the very devil!

None the less I shouted to the sphinxes:

“Open the gates, or I shall fire!”

Upon this one of the soldiers gave an unintelligible yell, and also brought his rifle to the “present.” From the Collector an answering yell. Then a wicket was torn open in the great massive wall, and there presented himself before us—a giant!

Yes, a fairy tale, for a certainty!

VI

IMAGINE a man nearly a *sazhen*¹ tall, and limbed in proportion, with a dead-white face, a magnificent black beard, an aquiline nose, keen, sunken, fiery, auger-like eyes, cheeks of a transparency like fine wax, long boots, officer's overalls, a leathern tunic, the badges of a colonel, and some high military orders. The glance of the eyes was a glance to compel the will, to command to anything, to command to death itself.

I raised myself to the salute. Then I dropped back as though a hand had clapped me thither. For on the Colonel's head there was—a copper *tazik* or surgeon's bowl, a thing like a spittoon, but fitted with a chin-strap in helmet fashion! And in the Colonel's hand there was a revolver! And ever that revolver was moving about—reconnoitring us with a sort of black, inescapable scrutiny!

Did this last for seconds, or for minutes?

All that I could hear, meanwhile, was a woodpecker tapping over our heads, a Collector

¹ Seven feet.

breathing heavily, the leather of one of the cushions creaking as it slid to my feet, and the car's impatient clattering and clacking.

And ever the revolver nosed about, reconnoitred. Until at length it began to do so with a slow, and, as it were, a reluctant, lowering of its muzzle, a lowering of a meditative nature, as though the weapon had been saying to itself: "Ah, well! We may yet see what will happen."

A second time I raised myself. But scarcely had I opened my mouth when the revolver menacingly emphasised the command, "Sit down again!"

The Colonel's glance was so furiously penetrating as to fetter all power of thought. I lowered my eyes, and saw, as in a dream, the Collector sitting with face sweat-beaded, wrinkled, and drawn, with eyes staring blindly from the innermost recesses of the hood.

Presently a gesture of his seemed to say to Sashka:

"Turn back, turn back!"

"Your hands from the wheel!"

And upon the command, a command as of steel upon stone, Sashka did withdraw them: one—two.

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And there we sat—as though shackled!

Suddenly I looked up again. Projecting from behind the Colonel, like a fungus from a stump, was a spare, wiry, clean-shaven, ape-like little man. Of greyish face, and with features like those of a pug dog, the man was clad in a pea-green dressing-gown, and carrying a blue writing-pad and a pencil. Clearly he was the Colonel's secretary. Possessed precisely of the smooth, sleek cranium and narrow, prominent forehead of a monkey, he stood staring at us with little rat-like eyes, and, like a rat, again, lifted a muzzle to sniff at us, in the capacity of a faithful dependent prepared for all things. And still the sentries remained standing like images. And still there brooded the all-pervading silence. Only a woodpecker tapped. Only a Collector gasped.

But at length, holding the revolver in line with his thigh, the Colonel uplifted his left hand, and approached the car. And now there was in his face a sort of nervous excitement, as of a sudden revelation of thought, whilst his eyes seemed to have lurking in them a sort of congenial secret exclusively his own. Sharply he said through his teeth:

"After all, I had been expecting you. Already the sounds here"—and he tapped his *tak*—"had enabled me to recognise that you were bringing us a con-son-ance. Besides, the influences had been weakening throughout the morning, whilst of late *their* assaults" (the word "their" was emphasised as though he had been speaking of some agency either over or beyond our heads) "have been colliding with my counter-influences, with my system, with the system of Colonel Babukin. Hence we are approaching deliverance. The supreme point, however, the point upon which everything depends, is solidarity. Never forget that. Never do our enemies sleep. Prokhorov!"

His gaze was so fixed, adhesive, as to submerge all will-power, and fetter it. A sort of net seemed to fall over my eyes.

Prokhorov, the secretary, straightened himself. Then he jotted down upon his writing-pad an entry, and read out:

"Your Excellency, 'Never do our enemies sleep.'"

By this time I was beginning to understand things a little, though not in their entirety. I had a feeling as though ants were crawling

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about my body. And as I realised our helplessness my will-power seemed to become crushed in a vice.

"But why remain as tongue-tied as a piece of baste?" continued the Colonel sharply, with a jerk of his revolver. "Deliver to me your report. Do not trifle with it. How are things going? Has the connection been effected yet? Give me the data. Is it the moon that the connection has been effected with? And if so, how was it done? Damn it, I wish to know whether an establishment of relations has taken place."

What reply was I to give? Yet that some reply was necessary was clear from the Colonel's threatening, insistent demeanour. Desperately rending away the sticky net of torpor, I straightened my figure, raised my hand to the peak of my cap, and delivered the first "report" that came into my head.

"Yes, *Gospodin* Colonel," I said, "the connection *has* been established—established with the moon, and we are about to be accorded a consonance."

"*What* consonance?" roared the Colonel with face convulsed. "Take care that you don't confound one thing with another."

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"*The* consonance, *Gospodin* Colonel," I replied, as still I felt about for the track of his ideas. "To you and to myself that ought to be perfectly clear. Signals have been observed, and—"

"Aha! Then matters *are* beginning to move! But the chief point is that those agencies have become aware of the measures which I am taking. Well, that should encourage us. The crisis is at hand. All this morning the influences have been weakening: and yesterday the light of the moon was clearer. That means that those agencies have failed altogether to extinguish the light, and that it is still living, and still letting us know that it is living. Yet how they assailed it!—Are you from Pulkovo?"

"Yes, *Gospodin* Colonel. We are from Pulkovo. Yes, certainly. And though we ought to be returning thither, we have run out of petrol. So I hold myself at your disposal."

By this time I conceived myself to have struck the line of his demented ideas. At all events I had envisaged the central fact: that here his word was supreme.

"Petrol?" he commented with a sort of slow, irritable distraction as he glanced at

me distrustfully. "Are you not losing touch of the point again?"

"*Gospodin* Colonel," I said more firmly, "we are from Pulkovo, but have run ourselves out of petrol."

And then, with a sudden idea of frightening him in some way, I added:

"For you must remember that Mars too is in disorder."

For the effect of this I had not been quite prepared. The Colonel turned as white as wax, and threw up his hands.

"Mars?" he cried. "Mars also? Oh, the devil!"

He made a sort of vague threatening movement at someone with his revolver, and continued:

"The possibility had escaped me. But perhaps no actual assault has been delivered?—perhaps the comets have passed it by? What is your own opinion about the matter? Tell me briefly."

By this time I was succumbing to the game. Lunacy notoriously is infectious, and involuntarily I was yielding to its influence. Arising within me there was a wild impulse of laughter—of laughter both at myself and

at the accursed thing which men call life. I longed somehow to burst the sordid envelope of flesh in which I was languishing, and see its disruption open up to me the world of which I had already been vouchsafed a pre-sage, the new, marvellous world of vision and legend, though, composed, it might be, but of coloured splinters.

However, I humoured the Colonel by saying: "Colonel, you have guessed aright. Beyond doubt you are a most wonderful astronomer. Yes, the comets *have* passed Mars by, though I caught a glimpse of them; of Greece, and of Italy, and of the Argentine. They passed Mars by: but they may have exercised an influence there."

Here I heard the Collector whisper:

"Mind what you are about, Captain!"

"Yes," the Colonel said after a moment's reflection. "That may be. Yet the circumstances are such that now we need not fear those comets at all. Nor does Mars matter in connection with the attacks. The whole situation depends upon the moon. Her gentle light is what is retaining life in animation. Wherefore Mars may be disregarded as a mere cipher."

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This last Prokhorov emphasised by noting down:

“Mars may be disregarded as a mere *ex* *ph*er.”

Again I made a fight for it.

“*Gospodin* Colonel,” I said; “pray give orders that we may be supplied with petrol. We *must* hurry away for the renewal of our assaults.”

“Then *who* are you?” screamed the Colonel as he brought his fist down upon the bonnet of the car. “Are you a villain, or are you a madman? Do you not know *who* it is that are delivering the assaults? Do you not know that it is our enemies—the enemies of life, and of humanity? Why, it is they who have set up the apparatus of blood!”

His gaze riddled me. I felt crushed with his dementia. Hence my voice faltered as I said:

“*Gospodin* Colonel, that was a slip of the tongue.”

“A slip of the tongue, you say?”

“Yes, *Gospodin* Colonel. I expressed myself wrongly. What I ought to have said was that we must hurry away for the renewal of *our investigations into the moon*—of course according to your system.”

“Strange it seems! Very strange!”

And the Colonel made an indefinite noise with his nose—a noise that included both anger and incredulity. Then he pursed his lips, strode away from the car, posted himself in the open wicket, and gave the command:

“Sentries, open the gates.”

As the sentries did so (by the way, one of them had only a cudgel for a rifle) Sashka moved forward, with many a squint at the Colonel’s revolver. It was a moment of tension, for now the Colonel was in our rear, and could easily have killed the lot of us. Presently, however, we heard the command:

“Close the gates again.”

And they slammed home with a deafening crash.

Thus we were fairly launched upon the nightmare.

VII

BEFORE us stood a mansion. Once a residence of some splendour, it was now old and dilapidated, with lofty walls spy-holed like the walls of a convent, a courtyard which, though spacious, was so overgrown with grass as to form a green, restful-looking carpet, and a range of white stone outbuildings with shuttered windows making patches of black against the whiteness, and gables garnished with storks' nests.

The mansion, a three-storeyed edifice of the castellated type, had a belvedere roof and a round tower set at each angle. In ground plan it was a Greek gamma, with a wing facing us, facing, that is to say, the gates, and a main portion fronted with tall pillars, and trending away to the right. The main entrance was approached by a flight of steps of white limestone, as broad as the steps of a cathedral; and whilst the building's dominant colour was yellow, the windows pierced in the side walls

—windows as large as doors—were covered with black, funereal-looking gratings.

Beyond some bronze palisading lay an old and growth-encumbered park, timbered with oak and lime, whilst in the centre of the courtyard an oak-tree of particularly huge dimensions shaded with its branches a once brightly painted, but now fast peeling, Calvary, and also a circular iron bench.

It was a mansion that might have contained dungeons, much worn flagstones, and rusty iron wall-rings, as relics of a long-departed past.

On the broad entrance-steps, and round the pillars, some patients in dressing-gowns were either playing cards or chattering together, whilst one, in particular, was kneeling before a pail, gazing into its depths, and intermittently crossing himself. Evidently he could see something in the pail. The courtyard was littered with iron bedsteads, torn mattresses, and ragged blankets, and amongst these other patients were walking about with their heads bent down. Lastly, on an *ikon*-frame under the central oak-tree there were some preserve jars: and beside the frame a tall, thin man with a head almost bald, and a body swathed

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in newspapers, was dancing from foot to foot, and chanting something or another.

As Sashka was driving up to the entrance steps the Colonel suddenly shouted from behind us:

"Steady on, there! Halt!"

From the mansion's broken windows heads and yellow patches of faces were waving rags and pieces of sheeting, and evidently giving us a welcome.

Sashka looked at me askance, as though bewildered as to what might be coming next. Then he growled:

"We're stuck fast now!"

The Collector seemed, at first sight, to be asleep, for he was still sitting on his satchel as after his first collapse: but presently I saw him look at the Colonel, and try to say something, though all that I caught of what he said was the word "return."

The Colonel took up a position beside the car, flourished his revolver in the direction of the roof of the mansion, and shouted:

"Sidorov! Musikant! How are things now? Any influences about?"

I followed his gaze, and beheld two men who, with *taziki* on their heads, were standing

on the peak of the gable, and engaged in holding up between them a telephone wire. They bawled the hoarse reply:

"Seemingly so, your Excellency, but his Excellency Lieutenant Kuroyedov is figuring them out."

Closing his eyes, the Colonel rapped back:

"Give me the exact signals, give me the exact signals! Where *is* the Lieutenant? And what influence is working? Damn it, report!"

Upon that there advanced to the edge of the roof—advanced as though a fall thence had been impossible—a pale, thin youth in a *tazik* like the Colonel's and a black dressing-gown. Sliding his legs over the roof-edge, he took a seat, and began smoking.

I caught at my breath; I felt my head swim. Surely the fellow would fall? But no: he just sat there smoking, whilst, below, the Colonel fumed and brandished his revolver.

"Be so good," the Colonel shouted, "as to observe discipline. For one thing, stop that smoking."

The Lieutenant straightened himself, doffed his *tazik*, and said languidly:

"Noticeably weaker are the influences, *Gospodin* Colonel. And we have launched a

counter-influence against them. Also, we have increased the number of wires to fifteen. Also, we have extended the area of defence. Also, the screens are working well. Also, their idea is sound. Also, silken ones would have been better."

"Do not interrupt me," rejoined the Colonel, waving a reproving hand. Then, apparently, he fell to internal listening.

The Lieutenant reoccupied his seat, rested his bare feet in the gutter, and resumed his smoking, whilst Sidorov and Musikant stretched a sheet between them, and made a rustling noise as they did so.

"Yes, silken sheets *would* have been better, *Gospodin* Colonel."

Bending forward, the Colonel tapped ten times upon his *tazik*. Then, manifestly angry, he cried:

"But I ordered silk to be provided for you. The fault is the fault of those people under arrest. Tell Musikant to see to it. They are bound to supply us with silk. Write about it to the rascally Superintendent. It is sheer roguery, sheer robbery, on his part. I suppose he expects me to bribe him! Why, though the matter concerns the salvation of

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Russia and humanity, here are these persons haggling over groats! My system is absolutely sound: it is the invention of a genius: and its results may be seen here"—he designated ourselves with his revolver—"in these gentlemen who have come to us with a consonance from Pulkovo. So we are saved! Hurrah!"

And everyone, both on the roof and on the entrance steps, responded with all his might: "Hurra-a-ah!"

With the result that I too, who had not heard the word for so long that it went to my vitals, had much ado not to join in the chorus.

The Collector thrust out a hand, and once more tried to speak. But, as before, I caught only the word "return." Evidently he was in a bad way.

Meanwhile Sashka was sitting bolt upright, with dull, glazed eyes almost bursting with the effort to understand.

For myself, however, I was no longer attempting to understand. I had done that long ago. Also, I had long ago found veritable, sane existence to be so tedious that the thought that I had temporarily got rid of it delighted me. It was an existence that might well

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become merged awhile with the shimmering world of a madman's tale. And already that world had begun to take shape in my consciousness, and to draw me, lure me, to itself—nay, almost to infect me to the point of believing that something really important was in progress on that roof.

Across these reflections cut the Colonel's nervous, strenuous voice.

"We must add more sheets," it said, "towards the west and towards the north. But especially towards the west. The agencies have taken to using magnetic disturbances to confuse us, but they will not succeed." To myself, in an impressive whisper: "Let me tell you that during the past few days I have discovered their secret, the secret of the moon's recent weakening and waning. Did you notice the phenomenon at Pulkovo? But of course you did!"

To that truculent gaze I hastened to respond:

"How could we not have done so, *Gospodin Colonel*? Yes, of course we did. Only—only, we did not feel quite certain about it."

"Ah!"—and the Colonel winked complacently. "Then rest easy. That is—rather, was—their last effort. The details of their

vast apparatus of offence" (the words were pronounced as though he had been speaking of something immeasurably base) "you will see in these notes of mine, and in my momentous treatise entitled *The Work of Blood*, a treatise that will revolutionise psychology and the histology of the nerve centres. And I would request you to take it back with you to Pulkovo, and to publish it in my name. You will understand that it is not a work suitable for competition for the Nobel Prize! Nevertheless it will make everything else of the kind pale before it. For now I, I, Colonel Babukin, have discovered the means of salvation for humanity. But for my having done so, humanity would have stood threatened, with debasement to the level of the beasts, or, worse still, with self-annihilation. Do you understand me?"

"I do, *Gospodin* Colonel. And for the same reason is there the more need for us to hurry away."

I was feeling not a little tempted also to tell him of the German advance: but I did not do so. Why did I not? Because now I felt reluctant to depart from the spot until I had learnt the whole of what might be going

on there. Yes, and I felt reluctant, too, to leave those fortunate-unfortunates (for, 'presumably, they were free from care) to the mercy of an infuriated foe. Only too well did I know what might befall them on the arrival of the first cavalry detachment! To such a fate I could not willingly abandon the Colonel and his fellow addle-pates. Why, they would not even know how to surrender! And, besides, the game had begun to claim me for its own; the present chaos of inverted life had caused anxiety on my own account to undergo a process of blunting; and the influence of that yellow mansion and those monastic walls had caused thoughts of Germans who might be 'wandering in the vicinity—even of war itself—to take unto themselves wings. Indeed, such matters seemed now to belong to a distant past only; whereas in the present, and in this place, I had at my disposal the shimmering, seductive world of a madman's tale.

Nevertheless I said:

"*Gospodin* Colonel, we have no choice but to hurry away."

Yet he seemed scarcely even to have heard me.

"Wait a moment," was all that he said.

"Do not interrupt me."

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Presently, however, he went on:

“Remember that you have yet both to learn the system in its entirety and to receive your instructions. If I ask you not to break in upon my train of thought, it is because through this”—and he pointed to his ear—“my enemies similarly seek to divine my hidden plans. You see, you do not yet know the whole depths of turpitude to which man can descend when his soul is lost. Here am I alone. But, though I stand alone, I am fighting, and facing tribulation, on behalf of all. See, now. They, the agencies of evil, have set in motion a motive-power of diabolical strength. It is a ‘radio-motor,’ a power worked with blood (for in *their* technique, in *their* science, blood constitutes both the first word and the last), and if you will look at these sketch-plans you will see pictured in them two gigantic steel cylinders, and two formidable towers—all filled with blood. And that blood is pumped into those cylinders and those towers at high pressure, and is hot, fresh blood which still has floating in it humanity’s more obscure thoughts and feelings, humanity’s sensory or fleshly passions; not so much the passions of mankind as the passions

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of the human male. . . . Do not smile. . . . And into that same hot blood those agencies infuse radium, infuse the animal force representative of the age-long, concentrated, and condensed sum of all the earth-born impulses which perpetually are hostile to the soul. And then this 'radio-blood' or black-motive force, this concentrated animal energy, ferments. Even now it is threatening to engulf the world beneath its obfuscous waves as they come hurled against us from the hand of those agencies which are for ever seeking to murder the free spirit"—here the Colonel struck his breast—"and to extinguish in humanity everything that is fair"—the Colonel's voice faltered—"and everything that is priceless. Thus the divine principle itself is in danger of being annihilated. Yet left to us still there is a means of salvation in the light of the moon, in the celestial, gentle, kindly light of earth's nocturnal guardian, of her who is the friend of poets, of her who is the friend of all sensitive souls powerless to endure the more sensuous light of the sun. I myself, when the moon is in the heavens, never fail to whisper to her: 'Hail to thee, gentle one! Hail to thee, thou of the night!'

For the moon's *ultra-green* waves (actually existent waves which are nevertheless unknown to, and denied by, the narrowness of our materialists and the self-opinionatedness of our physicists) have the power of atomically dissolving, and absorbing in perpetuity, the waves of 'radio-blood' which I have mentioned: And therefore I am, to all intents and purposes, creating a new science of physics, the science of 'psycho-physics.' And not long ago those agencies initiated a vast augmentation of their assaults, and communicated to the moon a process of decline or drainage (their waves being of incredible force); so that we stood threatened with conversion into mere machines, into mere instruments of those agencies' will, mere two-legged beasts of the earth. Perceiving, therefore, the catastrophe to be imminent, I constituted myself the representative of man's higher destiny, and of the God who dwells within man, and took upon myself this heavy task. And as one commissioned from on high have I pledged myself to save the world, and raised the cross whereon it stands written: 'With this shall ye overcome.' . . . And overcome I shall. . . ."

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Then the Colonel's voice rose almost to a shout as he thrust his maniacal face close to mine and added:

"Death to those who would murder mankind! Aye, death to them, death! They have had their fill of blood, but now they have encountered my system, the system of Colonel Babukin!"

His gaze flooded my brain—a gaze that shackled my consciousness, submerged me in torpor, and annulled my volition. But I struggled still. I clung to the word "petrol" as to the buttress of a bridge over the whirlpool of my thoughts. In tones as though fainting I cried:

"Only give us some petrol! Only give us some petrol!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"A-a-ah? So you still prate of trifles? Petrol? Petrol?—Why, long ago I ordered our supply to be poured down the sink. We have not a drop of it left. Petrol? Why, it was horrible, villainous stuff that had been poisoning us."

Yet, strangely enough, even this did not dishearten me. On the other hand, the Collector gave way to frenzy, and, kicking me on the shins, whined:

"Do get us out somehow!"

Sashka also, with cheekbones twitching, remarked to the world at large:

"Even kerosene would do."

"What is to be done, Colonel?"

"You must obey orders."

Then I felt driven to say:

"What if the Germans have penetrated the Front, and made it imperatively necessary to save both ourselves and your idea, Colonel—your idea?"

He retorted angrily:

"Be so good as to remember that only here am I at my post, and that only here and now can my idea be made operative and creative. Do not chatter nonsense, therefore, and play the woman. At least have *those agencies* not reached any front. Fronts were invented to distract the mind. They are but a device for the enslavement of the soul. Oh, *I* know those agencies, and their every social turn and twist! At bottom every one of them is charlatanry, hypocrisy: their design being to calk the soul, and ride about on the backs of slaves. Do you not see that? However, they shall be confounded. Already is their apparatus of assault begin-

ning to play them false; and though they keep searching and searching for my counter-system, ever it eludes them." Here the Colonel pulled a knowing wink. "So we are safe, now that our system is in full swing. Moreover, the supremely harmful factor has been rendered harmless. And that factor is *there*"—the Colonel pointed his revolver towards the out-buildings, before which sheets were hanging from clothes-lines. "Surprised, are you? Well, the affair had to be carried through. Everywhere those agencies had thrown out spies; and, of course, most of all here, where they hoped to strike at the central point. And those spies went sniffing about like dogs, and one of them, the so-called doctor of this place, one 'Michael Semenitch'—a man who had assumed a good Russian name; a name divinely inspired, and borne by a member of the Heavenly Host—well, this doctor was, in reality, one Simon Halske, the chief agent of those agencies from Berlin. And previously the same agencies had had me removed from the Front, and interned in this place along with many other innocent victims who had been unable to endure the bestial life. And after being interned I kept presenting protests,

and finding them intercepted by Halske. And when I drew up petitions, and beat my head against the wall, even then the spy only shrugged his shoulders. And, lastly, when I endeavoured to kill myself, the rascals threatened me with solitary confinement—sol-i-ta-ry con-fine-ment: and you know what that means! Thus the crisis arrived. Russia, all humanity, stood threatened with ruin: and that which was most needed was that which I could not provide—namely, an adequate means of defending humanity from the menace of destruction. Aye, even when those agencies had already begun to concentrate their ‘radio-blood’ upon myself (that they might strike at the main centre) I had for protection only the sheet of my bed! And that protected only myself! But now, but *now*, those agencies have struck an obstacle indeed!”

The strain of meeting his stare made my eyes ache, and the effect of contemplating his motionless, dilated pupils amid their setting of dull, bloodshot, congested, glutinous retinae was to enthral and hypnotise my whole mentality.

“So,” he continued as he thrust his face yet closer, and fixed me with his gaze more

firmly than ever, "I determined to act. ~~With~~ me I had men of the finest spiritual quality; men prepared to go to any lengths with me. And when I disclosed to them the impending catastrophe they were seized with horror, and straightway one of the greatest and most brilliant and most subtle of our band of mathematicians invented a system in comparison with which the system of Copernicus looks foolish. It is a system of co-ordination of mental tables, and its inventor was Captain Tokarev. Yet even he could not face the thought of the impending world-tragedy. He cut his throat with a piece of tin. But the rest of us gazed calmly forward, for the enterprise demanded such sacrifices. And in time I and my present friends—Lieutenant Kuroyedov, the modest, grey-headed Prokhorov" (as he pointed to his "secretary" the latter turned aside in bashful confusion), "Captain Korin (now acting as president of a commission), and three others—completed the system; and assumed the necessary authority for its working. And when the moment for definite action arrived I myself elaborated the *modus operandi* of cutting the telephone wires, seizing the watchmen, remov-

ing the attendants (without a drop of bloodshed, however), and surprising the arch-spy when asleep. After which we rendered these creatures harmless, and interned them in a secluded place. Which place is *there*."

And again he pointed his revolver towards the outbuildings. .

"But only for the time being," he added. "That is to say, until the commission shall have completed its work."

"And what do you intend to do with them then?" I inquired, endeavouring to appear indifferent.

The Colonel stared at me.

"What a question!" was his comment. "Why, they will receive their deserts, for they have blood to answer for."

Then his voice assumed a more steely ring.

"Be so good as to sit down again," he cried with a menace of his weapon as I sought to open the door of the car.

Then, in a milder tone:

"What of your flat-faced driver? Are you sure that you know him well?"

"Yes, *Gospodin* Colonel. And I know him to be a man perfectly reliable, and as in-offensive as a woman."

So eager was I to allay the Colonel's nervous suspicions that involuntarily I suggested, with my tone, that I understood as a matter of course the special reasons why any chauffeur of mine needed to be trustworthy.

Sashka himself seemed to be unaware that he was being made the subject of discussion. But that he was feeling uneasy was evident from the fact that he was inflating his cheeks, oscillating his cheekbones, and emitting his breath in puffs—signs, with him, one and all, of perturbation.

"Well, but look at him—look at his figure with those carnivorous teeth!—Ah well! During the past twenty-four hours the influences have been weakening. And how are they now, Lieutenant?"

The Lieutenant, who had been dozing on his perch, straightened himself in lethargic fashion, and reported:

"All is going well, *Gospodin* Colonel. So you might order dinner to be served."

"Cease from such childishness!" cried the Colonel reprovingly. "To think that you fellows can still cling to trifles! At the very moment when humanity is being raised from the dead, and our citadel"—here the Colonel

pointed to the yellow mansion—"is pervading the world with the vivifying currents of my system, we find such fellows as yourself thinking of food! But that will pass. Yesterday we were sent poisoned food, but I caught the rascal of a purveyor in the act, and to-day no bread has been sent. With what result? Prokhorov, read out the number of names on the muster-roll for yesterday and for to-day respectively."

Pulling up his figure, Prokhorov stepped forward four paces, and reported meticulously:

"Your Excellency, according to the returns of the department entrusted to my care, of the Department of Defence against the Destructive Influ——" here he blinked and stammered like a nervous candidate reciting before examiners — "of the Department of Defence against the Influences which Emanate from the Fury of Humanity's Enemies, the numbers for yesterday were, of subordinate ranks, 117; of superior officers, 2; and of staff-officers, 1; and for to-day, of subordinate ranks, 31; of superior officers, 2; and of staff-officers, 1."

"All of which means," the Colonel explained with flashing eyes, "that the faint-hearted

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have taken themselves off, and be damned to them! And to-day another one has had to be put outside.' Presently you shall see his remains. But such things are details."

The Collector gasped:

"How horrible! Oh, how horrible!"

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My own feeling, however, was one of bewilderment.

What was happening? What did it all mean? Was this illusion or reality? Why had such destruction been wrought? Who were the men thus warring with phantoms?

Yet was the destruction really destruction? Over there, among the fire and the bloodshed and the turmoil and the bayoneting of live flesh and the thundering and screeching of insensate steel, was it destruction that was being wrought, or construction? What if the present were one with the illusion obtaining both in the little town, and at the Front, and in my "tomb"?

Meanwhile the demented Colonel went on uttering words which had long been strange to me, and which I had never at any time heard at the Front.

"Mankind," he said, "is fixed in a vice, and being crushed! Met in contact are the bright contours of the future and the dark

skeletons of the present. And the re-clothing of those skeletons with flesh is in bloody operation. Yet whereas the evil agencies crave to clothe the skeletons in flesh alone, I would give them the spirit of a new and gentler world, a world more celestial than the present."

Then, if this were so, why should I regard the Colonel as mad? Was he not, to quote himself, "clothing with new flesh," tearing away the old? And was he not shedding drops of mental agony in the process? So might not *this* be the true reality? What, indeed, could be more "real"?

Thus the present was beginning to bear at all events the *likeness* of reality. Nay, it was beginning to be reality itself, and to contend with the illusion of the past. Was it not a curious phenomenon?

Yes, this newborn reality was beginning to level and efface the normal. Chaos—chaos! Yet the struggle was taking place very really, and I was at the vortex, in the clash, of it, even though striving painfully to extricate myself thence, and slough my growing insensibility to the normal.

And *pari passu* with this was accepted

"reality" still making itself felt, still retaining its grip, still affording me a measure of reassurance through such forms as a singing bird in a bush, and a Collector's rabbit-skin slippers and red-carpeted floor and ancient vodka. But where, oh, where, were you, my gentle ladies in feathers? And where, oh, where, were you, my quiet, dawn-lit garden, and my sunrises and sunsets, and my calf on the hillock, and my painted convolvuli, and all my other harmless, familiar, inoffensive commonplaces of life, of human life, of my individual human life? . . . No, I did not desire these new "births," these new "awakenings."

Yes, still perceptible to me, still of use to me against the moment's happenings, was the actuality surviving in the Collector, in Sashka, in Sashka's restful and prosaic neck, in all the simple things that lay behind that neck, in its "In-dif-fer-ent-o!" its fancy girl, its "We must go and kill them again," its jaunty set. . . .

The Colonel signed to me to alight.

"Come," said he, "and do not ask why. But what about that image of a chauffeur of yours? Are you *certain* about him?"

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As he put the question in his deep bass he eyed Sashka with a fresh access of hostility. "You see," he added, "it is a point that might prove of the greatest importance. Are you sure of him, I repeat?"

"Once before, *Gospodin* Colonel, I have had the honour to——"

"Oh, yes. I know. But his is such an accursed jowl! And those cheekbones, too! And that snout, that red snout! Agents always run to snout. The villain Halske has such a one, and cheeks to match—nasty, fleshy things filled with black blood! I have a special instinct for the detection of such creatures. *Vice versa*, look at my own people, and note how thinned down, how ennobled, they are—as different as can be from the rascals who can be recognised anywhere by their morbid look of health. Now let us proceed."

"Tell him about the Germans! Try and save us!" gasped the Collector during the process of extricating himself from the car. "That maniac talks down everyone!"

"And ask him for some kerosene," Sashka put in with equal solicitude.

It was not an easy matter to speak on such

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a subject whilst pondering over something quite different, and trying to devise a plan; but my companions' appeal worked upon me to the extent of inducing me to make another attempt.

"*Gospodin* Colonel," I said, "we ought not to lose a moment more in returning to Pulkovo and reporting to the world your achievement. So pray allow us at all events some kerosene."

Yet I nearly laughed as I spoke, for raging within me there was a sense of the ludicrous at everything—at this cyclonic alternation of "reality" with "illusion," and at humanity, and at the very thought of such a commodity as kerosene.

"Cease from that folly!" the Colonel retorted. "It is a point of no importance. Kerosene and petrol are practically identical: they have practically identical formulæ. Moreover, here is where I want you, for here you see the centre of things, and by concentrating our forces in this place we shall be the better able to strike outwards towards the periphery. Do you understand me? I must request that you do so."

At this moment he suddenly clasped his

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hands to his head, without letting go of his revolver, and gasped:

“What are they doing to me? Oh, what are they doing? They will not take away from me their infernal microphone! Ever I keep hearing their horrible voices! . . . But enough. Such things will soon have passed. Courage! Let us proceed.”

And the three of us descended from the car—the Collector panting and blinking affrightedly as he withdrew his satchel.

“Ah!” the Colonel cried with a backward start. “What is *that*? What is that—that satchel?”

I felt at a loss for a reply. But the Collector, as will be seen, rose to the occasion.

“A-a-ah!” Staring at the Colonel in horror-stricken fashion, with mouth agape, and eyes almost bursting from their sockets, the old fellow raised his cap, disclosed to view a now moist bald patch, lolled out his tongue, and fell to whimpering like a boy. Where, in that hour, was the wonderful audacity displayed on his own veritable, his own red-carpeted, floor, in the presence of the maddening Argentinian?

It was then, however, that there darted

from his brain, like a swallow from its nest, the idea that was so simple in its genius.

"These are—funds," he gasped. "Funds. Reserve funds."

"Funds?" exclaimed the Colonel with an excitement equal to his own. "At last! O dear friend, why have you never so much as said a word about them? But never mind. Give them to me. Yes, give them to me at once."

But, though he grasped the satchel, the Collector's grasp was equal to his, seeing that the "elemental" in that Collector was aroused.

"I—I am the—the local Treasurer," he said. "Yes, I am really. And I would hand over to you these funds were it not—were it not that—that my instructions demand from you *requisitionment in due form*."

This last was achieved only with great difficulty. Yet, seemingly, the Collector's wrung features, with their beads of agony under the eyes, wrought upon the Colonel's soul to the extent of accepting them as the features of one "ennobled" and "etherealised," and led him to relinquish his grasp upon the satchel, and to say with more courtesy:

"The local Treasurer, you are? Oh, that

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'is splendid! With you you have what I have long needed. What excellent foresight!"

And, his voice rising to a triumphant shout, he added:

"Herewith I appoint you the Senior Cashier of this Department, and your future Service career (I may take it that you *are* a 'careerist'?) is assured. Have you, er—have you much with you there?"

Oh, the power of finance! It had made even the Colonel polite!

"N-n-no; not much," the Collector replied, with an eye upon myself.

~~"Before~~ Before you lies a great opportunity, for it is imperative that our financial system should be reformed. For that, too, I have a plan—a plan of genius, and after that Prokhorov has given you your instructions you shall, to-morrow, present a personal report to Captain Kovin's commission. Now let us proceed."

And he beckoned us onward with his revolver.

Imagine the Collector's face—its features purple with the strain of terror and excitement, and rendered the more so with the exertion of towing the satchel along! As

sweat-bedewed they were as the features of a man who has just been extinguishing a conflagration. Indeed, as he trailed along in our rear he tottered like a man done for, with not a sound issuing from his lips.

As for Sashka, he attempted to remain beside the car.

"Your Excellency," he said plaintively, "these fellows will drive it about the place to bits."

And, displaying "carnivorous" teeth, he forthwith waved away from the car the secretary.

"Silence!" cried the Colonel in such a tone that the Collector dropped the satchel, and the throng in green dressing-gowns scattered to right and left with poultry-like squawks. "A sentry to the car! Now, follow me."

Sashka made a "phew" with his lips, and duly "fell in." Everything now, I felt, depended upon me alone. All my will-power must be concentrated upon the task of devising a plan of escape. Yet of escape to what? Of escape to that in which I no longer believed? Of escape to that for which I no longer had a use? Yet still there

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weighed upon my mind the thought: "How is the Colonel to be outwitted?" For, alone and unaided, I was no match for the giant with the revolver, and not much reliance was to be placed upon Sashka, and, as for the Collector, he could hardly stand upon his legs.

"Come along," the Colonel urged. "And let me tell you, if my people seem to you to be a little excited, that they have had nothing to eat to-day." As he spoke he pointed towards the mansion, whence a sound as of howling was issuing. "However, we must accommodate ourselves to our circumstances. Personally I am growing more and more convinced that the habit of indulging in a daily consumption of food is a bad habit. I myself have been fasting for two whole days; yet I feel perfectly well, perfectly well. . . . So you have got into communication with both Sevastopol and Vladivostock? That is right, and I thank you, I thank you." He pressed my hand. "Always I have believed in Pulkovo: at the present juncture I need such help."

Progressing almost at a run, his lithe, supple, athletic figure had about it a certain attractiveness of movement. Ah, well! Nothing mattered to the Colonel now. Life had

halted in his brain, and no power on earth could galvanise it into action again. The Germans might come and seize us, and clap us in bond: what did it matter when once one had become touched with the riot of madness? Yet *was* the "madness" madness? Surely one thing *was* as good as another? *There* living flesh was being torn in pieces. *Here* Colonel Babukin was administering his "system" according to his lights. Was not the one as good as the other? *Allons!*

So in the Colonel's wake we passed through the bronze palisading into the quiet park. What palisading it was, cast to represent wild beasts — bears, boars, wolves, lynxes, foxes, and deer — being hunted by men through woodland glades! Yes, the design of the waggish artist having been to demonstrate human power, he had depicted naked human beings engaged in disembowelling boars, seizing bears by the tongue, rolling on the ground with lynxes, and treading measures with wolves. Oh, it was a marvel, *was* that fresco of wild beasts!

Thence we issued before the wing of the mansion, amid a tangle of lilac and elder and deadly nightshade.

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The Colonel poked his revolver into a bush.

"Ah!" he said, "Odintsev failed to get the better of us—he had to be ejected. However, nothing is accomplished without sacrifice. And Galenka—has he been taken out of the cistern yet?"

Prokhorov frowned nervously.

"No, your Excellency," he said. "We could not get volunteers for the work."

"The fools, you! Do you all want to die of infusion of Galenka? The donkeys! See, now. These imbeciles will not understand that, if a man has taken poison, and jumped into a tank, all his fellows will be poisoned too if he isn't fished out in time. . . . I admit that these are unpleasant incidents. But what are they as compared with what *might* occur?"

I had heard the Colonel's remarks, but without the words really penetrating to my brain. For never had my eyes been able to leave the spot to which they had first become attracted, the spot upon which my every faculty seemed to be concentrated; the spot occupied by a bilberry bush; the spot where there were protruding a pair of legs; legs long, lanky, blue, and veinous; legs with

swellings and tumours on their calves; legs with twisted toe-nails; legs with soiled heels turned to heaven; legs for all the world resembling those of a wild beast.

"Yes, Odintsev failed to get the better of us," the Colonel repeated darkly.

On those legs the drawers had slipped down until their tapes were dangling in the wind. As for the head, it was thrust into the inmost recesses of the bush, near the roots, and enveloped in the folds of a dressing-gown. Almost the dead man might have been hunting for birds' nests, and, to amuse the company, taken a header into the bush with heels kicked up behind! But the heels were motionless: they were *dead*. What 'a type' of topsy-turvy life! What an apposite type!

"Surely you tried to help him?" I said quietly. "Or did you just leave him where he is?"

"Do not be foolish, Captain. A sharp splinter on the head. I could show you how it happened. Then I did the rest. So—out of the window!"

"I can feel my head swimming," the Collector groaned. "I feel anything but well."

And he subsided on to his satchel in the

middle of a nettle-bed, and buried his face in his hands.

"Come, come!" the Colonel cried. "Do not be so disturbed. Steady your nerves, man. Don't play the woman. Sacrifices must be expected. Come!"

"Old fo-o-ol!" drawled a bird-like, high-pitched voice from above us. And there dropped at our feet the lid of a kerosene tin!

I looked up. Peering from an upper storey was a sharp, polecat-like face with mocking features and a protruding tongue.

The Colonel threatened the face with his revolver, and it withdrew.

"Yes, these may be unpleasant details," he went on, "but, taking the broad view, our success has been great. Everything not helpful to the new life of the spirit we—we just throw it away: so that eventually there will remain to us only perfected beings able to endure unto the end. But what is that? Oh, it is *he* again, the miserable wretch!"

His voice had dropped to an agitated whisper, and his face turned blue. He seemed to be listening intently as he added:

"Do not be frightened, but there is a man close by who takes the idea too literally, too,

you understand, one-sidedly. He has been reading the Apocalypse, and—and, in short, he is perverting my system. Some day I shall have to give him one with my revolver.”

He cocked the weapon, and might have proceeded further had I not caught him by the arms and shouted: “Colonel!”

Just as he wrenched himself away, and turned upon me with blazing eyes, I heard a stealthy voice say from amongst some bushes—a voice that made me shudder:

“I can sha-ave! I can sha-ave!”

And a stream of faint, cool, deliberate abuse followed.

So deadly was the voice, so callous the stream of revilement, so cruel the intonation, that I turned faint and sick. It was so implacable, was the voice—so inhuman.

And presently there showed himself upon the pathway before us a man with a large head, stunted legs, bloated, dropsical features, and vacant staring eyes (their complaint, probably, being cataract). With a bow and a grimace, he muttered more obscene abuse, though the eyes remained as motionless as a pair of convex lenses. Then softly he stole forward with, raised aloft, and

flourished in the manner of a professional barber, a razor.

“I am co-o’oming! Let me re-each unto your soul!”

The words, uttered through the teeth with a sort of spluttered diction, came from blotched features which looked like those of a sleep-walker.

For a moment the Colonel seemed to stand paralysed. Then, jerking his revolver, he whispered in panic-stricken accents:

“Say the word ‘Merci.’ It never fails to stop him. He has frightened everyone like that.” Once Halske did succeed in taking away his razor, but these fellows cannot get hold of it.”

“I can sha-ave! I can sha-ave!”

And again the blotched face crept towards us. As it did so its owner held out two fingers of one hand as in the attitude of supporting a customer’s chin, and the other as though preparing to apply the razor.

And before that corpse-like face, that smile, that blind figure of death seeking a victim with bland, eyeless, horrible, inexorable courtesy, I recoiled. I heard the Collector shrink back and collapse altogether into the bed of

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nettles: but never for a moment could I withdraw my eyes from the chilly gleam of the razor.

"Merci! • Merci!" at length I shouted—though with a sense of shame at our helplessness, and at the fact that, after all, I could discern something comical in the man.

And the word "Merci" did act like magic; it did act like a compelling force; it did create, erect, a sort of dividing-wall on collision with which the blotched face came to a halt.

Twisting livid lips into a smile like a death's-head's grin, the face surrendered. Its owner drew one foot back as though executing a "reverence," murmured with a bow: "For such a trifle no thanks are needed" (words uttered grandiloquently, and as though by a High Priest, a sort of Pontifex Maximus), executed a second obeisance (though this time more with the obsequiousness of a barber), bashfully refolded the skirts of his dressing-gown, and re-entered the bushes.

Sashka whispered to me:

"Seize them now, your Excellency!"

"Charge bayonets!" shouted the Colonel to a soldier who was approaching with

Prokhorov pushing him from behind. "Who relieved you of your post? Prokhorov?"

From under thick brows the soldier stared at us in dull fashion. Lanky and emaciated to a terrible degree, he seemed to be, as the saying goes, "made in two pieces." Thrusting one hand into the other in aimless fashion, he eyed us vacantly, and swayed to and fro like an indiarubber stick. Clearly the machinery in him was warped machinery.

"Who relieved you of your post?" repeated the Colonel.

"Wha-a-at?" the soldier mumbled in reply. "No one relieved me. N-e-ever surrender. Sur-render!"

And again he gazed at the Colonel like a beaten dog.

Evidently the poor, ruined machine's crying need was bread.

O accursed mankind! Who or what had stamped upon this last link with nature the imprint of the gorilla? And what of mankind's intellectuals, of mankind's inspired creators of thought? In what terrible abyss were they wandering—amid what criss-crossings of beast tracks? Myself plunged in a seething nightmare, I could the better picture

the loneliness and terror of existence for human excellence, for those members of humanity who could evolve godlike thought, but still were condemned to wander, defenceless, on the brink of chasms, amid countless serried talons, countless bristling fangs, countless gnashing jaws, even though they were the members of humanity who most needed to be protected through segregation of the abnormal units of humanity behind steel walls until such time as such units should have shed the beast-like skin, and become clothed with new flesh, and fitted to answer the summons of heaven from the desert and from the depths. . . .

"Cha-a-arge bayonets!" roared the Colonel, clutching at the point of the soldier's weapon.

The soldier tucked up the skirts of his greatcoat (disclosing, in the act, a pair of hirsute shanks), and sought to execute, or, at all events, to remember how to execute, the given movement. Yet if the Colonel had not shouted to him at the right moment "Point!" the man would never have compassed the regulation lunge. After this he, the soldier, eyed us again with a sort of diffident, dull malevolence.

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"We must preserve the idea intact," said the Colonel testily. Then he shouted to Sashka:

"Five paces to the rear. March! Yes, and again! Yes, and yet again!—Prokhorov, make that red-snouted fellow fall back."

To myself he added:

"Are you certain of the man? Look at his cheekbones! For my own part, I believe him to be a product of those agencies. His teeth are so white and carnivorous."

"Once more I assure you that he is simple, reliable, and inoffensive."

"But do you suppose that *they*, the men who work with blood, lack any number of lusty striplings of the sort? See this piece of wood,"—and the Colonel touched a log with his foot. "There is no mischief in *its* composition. Yet it could be used to smash in the skulls of a thousand Aristotles, of a thousand Newtons. A fig, then, for your rude young brutes with carnivorous teeth and scarlet dewlaps! The thing to say to *them* is: 'Ten paces to the rear. March!' Not nearly all the influences of evil have yet been destroyed. A touch of the same thing is to be seen in the man who frightened us so just now. Yes,

and I say that although I know him to be one with us in his desire to seek out the guilty, and hunt down the wretches who have long been yearning and striving to destroy the living soul. But, fortunately, Vasili is a man of discernment, and respects the word *Merci*. Mathematicians are too apt to be confounded with psychologists. We ourselves are the latter. Have you your credentials upon you?”

Unexpected, rather, this last, but I rose to the occasion by saying stoutly (the Colonel seemed to prefer a tone of assurance):

“No, *Gospodin* Colonel. I am forwarding them to you by post, to avoid seizure *en route*.”

“By post? Then that was prudent of you. Let us proceed. Prokhorov, do you bring the key. And do you follow him.”

Re-entering the courtyard, we proceeded (in the wake of Prokhorov, and under the escort of the Colonel and the imbecile soldier) to the range of outbuildings before which sheets were suspended from clothes-lines.

“Here,” the Colonel said impressively, and evidently perturbed, “there is need for added caution.”

We halted before a large, heavily padlocked door.

At this stage the Colonel seemed to grow uneasy even to the point of intensity: he kept thrusting his revolver about, and giving nervous starts. Clearly these outhouses were to him a special source of danger, since they contained "the German agent Simon Halske and his associates."

"Pull out your handkerchief, and use it for a respirator," the Colonel whispered as he pressed his own to his lips. "You are on the point of hearing the rabble whom I have mentioned. Prokhorov, unfasten the door."

Prokhorov unlocked the coach-house. Piled to the roof with boxes, tubs, bandage-rolls, bedsteads, broken-down furniture, and the Lord knows what, it had everywhere about it a smell of stale cabbage.

I crossed myself, and with a great effort lifted a trapdoor that was let into the floor. Then I started back in horror. The stench was worse than ever.

"Listen!" the Colonel whispered from behind me. "Listen!"

I leaned forward from the threshold of the coach-house to glance at the hatchway, which had stretched across it a piece of sheeting,

so that it resembled the skep of a bee-hive. The next moment I was dragged violently backwards.

"Are you mad?" the Colonel hissed as he plucked at the skirt of my coat again. "Cannot you smell the odour of putrefying blood, the thing of horror? It represents the last attempt of our foul assailants, but they are continuing their accursed work, and spreading the stuff's filaments far and wide."

With handkerchief pressed to mouth and nostrils, and eyes rolling in abhorrence, he kept pointing his revolver at the trapdoor, and then at ourselves, whilst his face turned damp and grey. Clearly the cellar had for him an equal measure of attraction and of repulsion.

In tones which, issuing through his handkerchief, seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, he continued:

"I intend to keep them in durance until he, Simon Halske, has removed from me his microphone. Yes, I intend to starve and compel them to submission. They would read my thoughts, would they? They would destroy my idea? Ah, *I* will destroy *them*! Remember, you rabble, that whereas I am for

raising humanity, you are for beating it down, for killing in it the living soul, for effacing from it God's image."

Then, with a nudge, he added:

"Listen, listen! Hark to them as they send forth their waves! Do you hear the sound? And see that vapour, that vapour—the 'very germ of corruption!'"

The "vapour" was but the swaying, undulating, rising and falling, blurred white sheeting of the aperture. Yet was it only sheeting? Was it not also a film endowed with life?

But this was madness!

From the depths profound sighs and rustlings were welling.

But this too was madness, surely—madness crawling to me from the oppressive stench of human dung, from the throat-rattlings and sighings, from the stifled groans, the shrill sobs, the weepings; madness that, bellying out the ragged sheeting, was worming its way forth, spreading, and threatening to overwhelm me?

Yet, confused though my thoughts were, I always had before me the fact that those prisoners down there, in the cellar's choking

filth and darkness, those prisoners herded and pinioned together, were sane people, a doctor and a staff of nurses and attendants, and that where we were there was stark lunacy running amok with a revolver, and that before that lunacy we other sane human beings were standing helpless.

How the position, therefore, represented life's absurdity in little! With peculiar acuteness also I realised that, let me but make the smallest movement, and the Colonel would hang upon his trigger about as much as the imbecile soldier would hesitate about sticking me with the bayonet.

Then my thoughts began to alternate. Surely it was down there, in the cellar, that the real horror was lurking—the horror which had been terrorising human life, and doing it to death? Then no, again. The real horror lay in the Colonel who had mastered me against my will. Then no, again. The real horror lay in the men who were wreaking deeds of blood in the world outside. Then no, again. The real horror lay in the people amid the putrefying dung and filth of the cellar, who were people of the beast-like type, people who had sought to slay the living soul born of gentle, celestial

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light, to seize and extinguish the radiance of the free spirit, to crush that spirit under a mass of human flesh, to drown it in seas of human blood.

"Ah, the accursed ones!"

Who had uttered the words? I myself?

"Aye, the accursed ones!" assented the Colonel hoarsely.

"Colonel, release us!" cried a distracted woman's voice. "We are perishing! We are starving! Oh, this is inhuman of you! We cannot stand for very weakness."

Then *who* were those people in the hole?

- The Colonel gave a cruel smile as ever he listened and listened.

Next, there came floating and throbbing from the cavity a perfect babel of voices, pitiful or reproachful or conciliatory.

"For shame, for shame, Nikolai Vasilitch! We are in torture."

"Your Excellency, pray have mercy upon us!"

"Rally your strength of mind. Korovkin has gone out of his senses, but you are a man of reason."

"How can you treat your nurses so? We gave our all for you suffering people."

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"Listen to *that* serpent voice!" hissed the Colonel in my ear.

"Colonel," a man's smooth, velvety voice said: "I give you my word of honour that, if you will release us, you shall be conceded your own liberty, and I will forward your reports to the Ministry in their entirety. Pray, therefore, consider matters."

"Simon Halske giving his word of honour!" exclaimed the Colonel. "And he will forward my reports, will he? But to whom?"

"Your Excellency, pray release me for the sake of my orphaned children."

"Fashal has lost his senses."

"You are brutal, Nikolai Vasilitch. To think that a man of decency should treat us in this abominable fashion! Korovkin has——"

What a nightmare it seemed! Here were the very people who knew the Colonel best, the very people who had caused him to be confined in a madhouse, appealing to—to his strength of mind! Yes, and in earnest, too, and from the very bottom of their hearts! What a horror of darkness and delirium it seemed to be!

The Colonel had listened to the cries as he might have listened to ravishing music. He had been drinking in the sense of these people's

miserer with rapture. That such was the case was shown by his smile, and by the set expression of his features.

"I swear that all of us share your views," cried the hysterical voice of a woman. "Yes, all of us."

"Yes, we believe in them entirely. I myself have a particular belief in them."

"Listen to the syren piping!" the Colonel buzzed in my ear in tones tremulous with gratification.

"In the name of all that is holy, I am ill with fever, and ready to acknowledge your authority. Korovkin too is ill. Pray send down a doctor."

"Ah! So when you are beaten, you accursed ones, you expect *me* to save *you*!"

"Yes, your Excellency; we are twice beaten, and I, for one, am ready to accept your cross of salvation if only you will deliver my soul, my soul, my God-damned soul!"

In the last voice we had heard the utterance of a man who was losing his reason.

"Listen, Colonel," another broken, feminine voice moaned. "Nikiphov Ivanitch is ill. Think of it! And Doctor Korovkin is ill, and gone out of his mind. Pray release us."

"Save my soul, my soul, my God-damned soul!"

"We have been two days without food. O God, release us!"

"Nikolai Vasilitch, I know you to be a man of conspicuous talent, a truly marvellous man. And I feel that your heart is in proportion."

"Besides," put in the velvety baritone voice, "we are sensitive now to your influence. But we need a doctor. Yes, I am serious about it. Korovkin has gone out of his senses. Pray let us go."

"Agent and spy Simon Halske," shouted the Colonel in a choking voice, "only the tribunal which is sitting upon you in your absence can let you go. Once and for all I tell you that you are not going to escape my clutches. Death to all murderers of mankind!"

"Then are we to die? O God! Kill us at once, Colonel—kill at all events your Anitchka! Yet how I used to tend your needs!"

"Of all the serpent brood you are the very worst, the very worst!"

"My God!"

I could restrain myself no longer. Flinging prudence to the winds, I shouted:

"Good people, I too am sane; but——"

No more could I utter, for want of breath. Upon my throat was the steely hand of my captor. I wrested myself clear to find myself looking down the barrel of his revolver.

"Do not move," he said. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

And his bloodshot, maniacal eyes fettered my gaze once more. Only for a moment did I catch a glimpse of Sashka with grey face, and of the Collector sitting on his satchel, with bald head pressed against the wall.

"Colonel," I shouted down the revolver, my self-control gone, "my one wish is to leave this horrible scene."

Yes, I who had faced death at the Front, had played with it there, now stood helpless before this madman!

"Close that pit!" I went on in a frenzy. "I cannot bear to hear the sounds issuing from it!"

"Yes; close it down," said the Colonel. "So you understand *now*, do you? Certainly the sounds are 'unbearable.'"

With returning confidence he looked me in the eyes: and he even bestowed upon me an indulgent smile.

Prokhorov slammed home the trapdoor, and jumped upon it to make it the more secure.

"They want food, do they?" The Colonel laughed with a display of teeth. "Well, that does not matter so long as they be well-housed. And to think of giving them good bread! How many people"—he thrust his face into mine—"have they not poisoned? Think of Odintsev. Think of Galenka. And systematically, too! When I found that they were passing currents through our bread, and ordered a lot of it to be thrown down the sink, the wretches actually went and fished it out again! And the result? Well, threescore only of us remain. The rest are—gone."

He tried the lock of the coach-house, rearranged the "defences," and motioned us towards the house with his revolver.

"Now," he said, "you are to receive your instructions. Follow Prokhorov."

IX

WE passed into the building in the strict order of persons under arrest: first, Prokhorov, then the wooden Sashka, then the unfortunate Collector and his satchel, then myself (with the soldier at my side, holding his bayonet at the "charge"), and, lastly, the Colonel. As I walked I kept saying to myself: "Surely an end will come to this? Surely an end will come to this?" But never a thought was I giving to the Germans, who had practically ceased to exist. In my ears there were only the wailing voices of the cellar. Yes, to these things an end was bound to come, could not help coming. And yet—how? I could form no idea. A concrete thought might appear in my brain; but at once it would vanish again.

In the entrance-hall, under dark oaken beams garnished with antlers, and flanked, over the doorway, with the head of an Uralian ox (probably men with heads equally strong

had once feasted there), there was seated in a leathern armchair, behind a long white table, a thin, swarthy little man in the white canvas tunic and shoulder-straps of an artilleryman. So covered with dark bristles was his face that he resembled a black beetle, and when he entered the hall he was scribbling at something or another, and never even raised his head. Before an iron fireplace, large enough to serve as a bear's den, a heavy-faced, puffy-looking, red-headed, dressing-gowned soldier was lying on his stomach and turning over the leaves of a volume of "Niva" as swiftly as a windmill in a gale—seemingly to the turner's enjoyment.

"The Commission of Prosecution," explained the Colonel. "How now, Captain?"

"Go to the devil! Go to the devil!" snapped the Captain with a pre-occupied air, and without turning his head, but continuing to work away at his scribbings. And remarkable scribbings some of them were, with their parentheses, formulæ, and *nota bene*s.

"Well, let us not be caught napping, let us not be caught napping. You will have the business completed to-day? News has just come from Pulkovo."

"Go to the devil! Go to the devil!" shouted

the Captain, as he whirled about amongst his papers. "How am I to manage without a logarithm-table? And I haven't even the use of a pair of compasses, or of a typewriter!"

"An odd genius," the Colonel commented to me with a shrug of the shoulders, "but an oddity as efficient as a machine. You see in him my right hand. Now, this way."

And he pointed to the staircase.

Everywhere I could see marks of destruction—a litter of gilt-edged books with bindings torn, of broken-down chairs, of soldiers' mugs and tins, of wisps of straw, of strips of cloth, of tattered garments: the whole covered with a fine, floating, impalpable dust.

On the top storey three large windows had been curtained over with sheets, whilst a man in a pink shirt exposing legs as hairy as a gorilla's was endeavouring to curtain a fourth, in evident pursuance of the order as to "defences." Unfortunately, the task was not altogether suited to his capabilities, and with a leg wrenched from an adjacent cot he was hammering the empty air mostly, and raining blows upon his own fingers.

"Not like that, blockhead! Not like that!" roared the Colonel. "It is not like that that

you were told to do it! Are there no such things as crevices? Into the crevices, I tell you—into the crevices! And higher up, too, you donkey!”

But the man was too short to reach the upper portion of the window-frame, even with the cot-leg.

“Not like that, either!” shouted the Colonel as, throwing down the revolver at random upon a cot, he sprang on to the window-sill.

“Now, give me the hammer, ass!”

As it happened, however, the “ass” in question was both stubborn and vicious, and declined to relinquish the “hammer”: wherefore there ensued upon the window-sill a struggle which smashed the window-frame to atoms. Fortunately the window was gratinged. Meanwhile the soldier with the rifle looked on at the turmoil with equanimity.

I had just time to snatch up the revolver, to relieve the soldier also of his weapon, to shout to Sashka “Catch hold!” and to grasp the Colonel by the legs. Then, jointly, we dragged him from his perch, and threw him upon the floor, where he lay stunned with his own *tazik*. Thereafter we bound his feet

with sheeting, strapped his hands, and laid him upon a cot, where he remained lying with eyelids over upturned pupils, foam-flecked, fast-blanching lips, and a chest breathing heavily.

"Next, for petrol!" panted Sashka. "We have lost an hour already."

Only an hour? Well, that might be so, for I had lost count of time. What next? I seemed to have lost will-power as well.

I gazed around. All was still. So *I* was in command of the situation!

"It is my orders that you must obey now," I said to Prokhorov.

The little fellow was standing bolt upright against a wall with lips quivering and grey, pug-dog-like, marmoset's face expressive solely of mad terror.

"And as for you," I continued to the Collector, "damn your nerves! It is time to act, not to whimper."

The Collector gave a start. Then, still seated upon his satchel, he covered his face with his hands.

I had raging in me such a frenzy as had raged in me *there*. I could almost have struck the old fool.

"Well?" was his humble inquiry. "What is it you want?"

What was it I wanted? Really, I did not know. What, as a matter of fact, *did* I want?

Sashka, eyeing me over his rifle, ventured upon:

"We want petrol."

"Go to the devil! Yes, go and look for some, and be damned to you!"

I was boiling with rage at him as well. I could cheerfully have brained the wooden image. But he departed on his quest, and the bare-legged soldier, for his part, subsided under a cot.

What next, then?

At this point the Colonel uttered a gasp. He seemed to be recovering consciousness, for his eyes were staring about with a sort of vague, questioning air. I bowed.

"Can you hear me, Colonel?"

He looked at me as though seeking something within me, and as though trying to remember something. And presently the gaze expanded, and grew keener. And then it caught fire, and recollected things, and re-found itself. And at last the lips moved, and there came an indistinct murmur of:

"The accursed ones!"

Looking at him, I felt that he and I were linked in a like bond of distress. That distress I could realise in myself, and divine in him—in his pinioned form and glazed eyes and heavy breathing. And so the strain of our confrontment became unbearable. It would have to be removed somehow. I felt that, were I to remain longer in that *tête-à-tête*, something would give way.

Yet sorrow and pity filled my heart as I contemplated that rugged face, the face of an ascetic. Mad or sane? Well, what did the "respectable," pride-puffed word "sane" signify? Something had given way in the Colonel—gone wandering—deviated from the normal in quest of a new rut. And it was questing for that rut in agony, and amid a shattering of "reality." . . . And I too was questing. . . .

But, for the immediate moment? Oh, the secretary.

He was still standing against the wall in the rigid attitude of one who had been posted there on sentry duty. And as I looked at the little fellow I felt sorry for him, and, beckoning kindly, bade him become my assistant.

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And my assistant he became.

“Prokhorov, the key.”

At once he handed it over. Then—what next? What else required to be done?—Oh, we must proceed *thither*.

X

THE Collector looked at me with the leaden eyes of a sleeping fish.

"*Thither*, Collector!"

Yet, even so, I had to take him by the shoulders and shake him.

"All things are illusion," he said in an altered voice. Then he burst into tears, and, seated on his satchel, continued to gaze at some invisible point.

"Save the Treasury's millions!" I yelled. That *did* set him going.

For beneath his bald and polished pate there was a brain neither dull nor inactive, nor possessed of those delicate scruples which are only too apt to emerge on provocation. So, grasping his satchel, he followed me quietly.

"Captain Korin," I explained to the little man downstairs, "our duties stand cancelled."

But so intent was he upon his own "duties" that he dismissed us with a mere "Go to the devil! Oh, go to the devil!"

Lastly, for "Simon Halske" and his staff.

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These people were soon freed. And a pitiful, shuddering lot they looked, with the nurses weeping hysterically, and saying:

“Christ is risen! O God, my God!”

And presently, when they saw the destruction which had been wrought, and realised it all, they clasped hands to heads, and relapsed into fresh convulsions.

Similarly did the tottering, exhausted male attendants stand gazing distractedly at the green-carpeted courtyard, in doubt what first ought to be done. And in particular a stout cook kept saying tearfully:

“To see the world again, my friends! To see the world again!”

The one to be least overcome was the doctor himself. True, his cheeks looked drawn, and had upon them a dusting of grey bristles; but their glow had remained unfaded, and his small, round head kept turning from side to side as he compressed his lips and noted the damage. At last he murmured:

“At least it is good to be free again. To you—our gratitude!”

And his face grew dim for a moment. Then it cleared again, and, after indulging in a shave (he had a spare razor for the purpose),

and a wash, and swallowing a dram of liquor, he helped to restore a sister to consciousness, and shouted to the attendants to round up the patients. He was extraordinarily calm. Seemingly, nothing out of the way had happened.

And even when I told him that the Germans had broken through, he merely shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Anything might happen. But I see the position here. The telephone wires had been cut, and everyone had forgotten us. Always it is so. Nor will anyone be to blame for it. We used to have two hundred and thirty patients; but now, I suppose, the majority of them are lost."

Somewhat similar words uttered by the Colonel came back to my mind; but he had put the matter rather differently.

"What next, doctor?"

He shrugged his shoulders again, and Sashka looked equally indifferent. After vainly searching for petrol, the latter had adopted a pose of resignation.

"Suppose we smoke, Captain? Morning will bring better counsels than eventide."

So we seated ourselves on the iron bench beneath the oak-tree. And the paint-blistered

Calvary gazed upon us, and, like ourselves, upon the destruction wrought. In that place life was standing on its head, with its heels in the air. Tumbled bedsteads, torn mattresses, doors and windows wrenched from their fastenings, and glass splinters sparkling in the sunshine all seemed to be crying out:

"We are the human brain in revolution!"

And suddenly there flashed into my mind an idea. And I hastened to communicate that idea to the doctor.

"Look!" I cried. "See how those things are laughing at us!"

"What do you mean, Captain? Who is laughing at us?"

"Those things there—the trees, the stones, and everything else. See their jaws and maws gaping!"

Failing to understand, he eyed me much as, probably, he eyed his restless patients.

"What opera are you quoting from?" he added.

I laughed, brought a hand down upon his firm, resounding knee, and cried:

"Ah, doctor! A sane, sound soul indeed you are!"

And there we sat, on that iron bench

beneath the oak-tree. And still the Figure on the Cross, with the pendent lip of alabaster, gazed upon us. But now the mouth seemed to me to be open, and the blistered eyes to have become blind and extinct, and the whole form to be uttering, in some dim, voiceless way, a cry of pain.

But of *this* I said nothing. I could not share such a secret as that, even with the doctor.

So we sat there, on the iron bench beneath the oak-tree. And the windows, rainbow-tinted in the sun's beams, glinted upon us like watchful eyes. And pale nurses were wandering about as they mended things, and the male attendants were collecting the fragments of life, and rounding up the patients.

Suddenly from the roof a timid, eager voice inquired:

"May I come down, doctor?"

And somehow the diffidence, the gentleness, of that voice cut me to the heart, and I cried to myself:

"To *them* I belong. It is with *them* that my lot shall be cast."

"Yes, come down, Lieutenant," the doctor responded carelessly.

To myself he added:

"This fellow is quiet enough."

A stoutish man, seated on the grass at a little distance, was repeating to himself as feverishly he broke up some beehives:

"It is not so very simple. Oh no; it is not so very simple. Colonel Babukin himself is aware of that."

"A new case in course of development," was the doctor's comment. "It is humanity's way of purging itself. I am a great believer in the Process of Selection."

And, certainly, his extraordinarily clear eyes, ruddy cheeks, and ever-ready pocket-comb showed him to be a rare model of the healthy male. Yes, he was healthy in every way, with strong, white teeth like Sashka's, and cheekbones like Sashka's.

Sashka himself was standing beside the car, and devouring something or another culled from the Collector's basket. As for the Collector, he had disappeared. Probably he was concealing the Treasury's millions! • •

Presently the doctor inquired as to the hour, the when, the whence, and the wherefore of our arrival, and noted the particulars in a pocket-book. And when he learnt of our lack of petrol, he said cheerfully:

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‘ “This is most convenient! Unless disturbed first, we will dine. Then we will hang out our red-cross flag, and say boldly to the Germans: ‘ We surrender ’ —in their own language *Nemen sie gefangen*. The war is over so far as we are concerned. *Finitum est*.”

Later . . .

But I do not remember the details, save that we released the Colonel, injected into him some morphia, and soon had him asleep. Then the attendants retired, leaving to us the top storey of the wing, and I settled down to my task of tending the Colonel during the night. And as I sat there many visions passed before my eyes.

XI

DARKNESS had fallen: all had grown still: what would the morning have to say to us?

I sat by a window, and listened to the voices of the night. Everywhere there was a hush. The only thing to be heard was the distant, dull beating of gunfire. The Colonel was breathing stertorously. What nightmare was upon him? What cruel demons were rending his heart with their claws?

Was it worth while so to be tortured "in the name of"—of what, of whom? I, for my part, would be tortured no more. I had seen, and lived through, too much for that. . . . How glorious that frescoed palisading had been! How thoroughly its craftsman had understood his work! And the oak-tree, too! And the Crucified One with the paint peeling from Him, and His face lost in a cry! Ah, it was not with *them* that I could, or would, throw in my lot. The doctor had been right. The great Process of Selection was humanity's method of purging itself. And

that Process was in being, and the very rocks were smiling, gaping, and quietly grinding as they felt about for the new flesh. And in proportion as humanity became, purged, so would men less and less be able to torture me "in the name of," but discover the supreme secret, and fall to charging mankind, rather, with firm, strong brain-power! In short, the great triumph was at hand. Yet would it not be strange when the gorilla had acquired a human sensitive soul? Ah, well! At all events, man would be able, in return, to call himself, proudly and boldly, a gorilla!

In the moonlight that was flooding the mansion's courtyard and yellow walls I could see phantoms floating, and making signs to me. Who were they? They glided without a sound! Who could they be? Were they unhappy beings who had once possessed human souls, but souls merely frail, and weak, and still overlaid with the beast-like tegument? Or were they beings from a purer, gentler sphere than this, come to achieve birth on earth? Was I, in fact, witnessing the secret of secrets? Were those dim outlines, those gliding shadows, enacting the birth of the better humanity of the future?

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But coming to my ears also were terrified moans, and shouts of execration. Then, after all, this could not be the world's renovation! No, it was *they*, those evil agencies, wandering about in the night void. Not yet present on earth were the forces capable of such a conception. The thing conceived of blood would still, for a while, be of beast-like strength, and prone not to fail, or to tremble, or to torture itself "in the name of" anything. . . .

And I could hear snorings, too, and snufflings. Ah, *they* came from the Collector, who was sleeping, not star-gazing as I myself was doing. The moon was playing upon his bald patch; peace was resting upon his slumbers. This because, before retiring, he had buried his satchel under a pile of shavings in the coach-house!

Stretched beside the Colonel was Sashka—also snoring bravely. Before tucking himself in he had wished the Colonel pleasant dreams. Then, feeling himself to be altogether the victor, he had observed with spontaneous originality:

"Look you, the man who doesn't possess a mind can't, at least, go out of it."

Well, now he and the Colonel were equally

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safe from such a contingency. For now even the Colonel was actuality and fact.

Thus I sat listening by the window as I dreamed my dreams. And ever, the full moon kept rising higher as she watched over the earth. "Hail to thee, gentle one! Hail to thee, thou of the night!"

But just at dawn, when the sun was rising, and I had fallen into a doze, there came to me the sound of a trumpet call. Springing to my feet I peeped through the window-blind, and beheld a scene as real as the bald head of the Collector. Into the courtyard there had galloped a German detachment some twenty strong. Mounted on powerful roan or chestnut horses, and clad in leather, cloth and steel, they had at their head a youth whose face, over a silver cuirass, looked as fresh as a red-cheeked apple. And, waving a silver-hilted sword towards the sheet on the entrance-gates, the lad shouted:

"Whom and what have we here? In particular, what is *that*?"

"And again he pointed with his sword to the sheet on the entrance-gates.

A striking picture it made, as revealed before the windows of the wing: the sun's

red, early morning beams playing upon the silver and the steel; the powerful, sweating horses and the straps and carbines, overalls and long boots and spurs. Upon the lowest step of the entrance-flight stood the doctor, with a cloak hastily flung over his shoulders, and a handkerchief tied to a stick in his hand. Said he with absolute distinctness:

“*Nemen sie gefangen.* We surrender, *Herr* Lieutenant. The Red Cross covers us.”

“Yes, but damn it, what is *that*?” repeated the German with boyish petulance. “What is that half-moon, or something of the sort?”

The doctor replied as incisively as before:

“This place is a place shunned by all men. It is a lunatic asylum. We request immunity at your hands.”

And what, think you, did the men in cloth, leather, and steel, the men mounted on powerful roan or chestnut horses, the round-headed, raw-boned stalwarts in cuirasses, respond to this appeal? Why, they responded with a roar of laughter—they laughed as though they too had been madmen! And that laughter was re-echoed by the pine-trees as they yielded up the secret, and by the quiet undergrowth.

and by the mansion's empty outbuildings and attics. For that laughter voiced the life of reality, the life that is stentorian, and full of blood, and prone not to dreaming, and ignorant of doubt, but assured that: "*I am life.*"

And into the midst of that deafening, guttural vacuity, up to the muzzle of the leading horse, there glided a small, grey, stunted shadow. And there showed itself the lightning gleam of a razor.

Smack! — A moustached sergeant-major had stretched the figure prone. The scene swam before my eyes. . . . Hoofs of a rearing horse, the flash of a sabre, helmets, more sabres, yet more sabres! . . . And on a dewy expanse of turf, beneath roseate-silver sunbeams, a small, grey, quivering heap! . . . And hoofs again, and plunging horses, and sabres, sabres, sabres! . . .

XII

HERE a break must occur, for of what followed I can remember almost nothing. A blur of round faces under helmets; strained, dilated eyes; shrill voices (of the nurses, probably). . . . Blessed the Hand that drew a veil over the scene! I can recall no more of it than that. . . .

Darkness seemed to float through the window, and flames and thunderings. The firing of heavy guns, presumably. And a familiar face . . . Sashka's? It appeared, and flitted about. And a stranger seemed to be standing there with a drawn sword. . . .

Again flashes of light: again thunderings, as though everything were falling about me. Then a roar of cheering that swept through the windows like a volley. It was a sound that for a moment wrested me clear even of my darkness.

Then the bearded face of a Cossack; a faint smell as of cognac; a hairy hand seemingly tendering me a pot of marmalade. Yes,

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someone came and smoothed my forehead, lit a pipe, and said something in cheerful tones.

I heard the words, but could not catch their sense. They seemed to say:

"Our lot done 'em in—Artillery covered splendidly—Simply smothered 'em—Dug a nice hole—Tumbled 'em in like rats—First-rate sport!"

"Rats? What rats?"

Then it *was* Sashka? Yes; at last, and with a beaming face!

"The Germans, your Excellency! Our Cossacks caught 'em."

Also, a kindly nursing-sister with a bright flaxen head, and the dear, familiar eyes of a Russian girl. And wonderful crystals sparkling in a tumbler. I suppose, ice crystals. As they melted themselves into me I seemed to become stretched out, to grow thinner, to change into a long, bright, resonant string. . . .

Another break.

Next, a town. Twilight streets; lamps; a vaulted ceiling; pictures in gilt frames; a long table under a green cloth; officers; papers; rifles. Seemingly, a court-martial. Yes, surely? But for what purpose? Was I back in my old dream of Italy, Greece, and the

Argentine? Some Cossacks, jaunty of crest, and fiery of eye—the eagles of the Steppes. And the bald patch of a Collector wobbling about near my elbow as he muttered and whispered: “*At last, Captain! At last.*” Ah, and the Italian!—beating his breast, and talking, talking, talking! Then what of the Argentinian lady? There was no Argentinian lady: only a dishevelled woman, crying out in a husky voice:

“Have mercy upon me! Have mercy, my countrymen!”

So it *was* a continuation of my dream!

Then an elderly man with a moustache and military decorations and a black eye-patch—a man keen of eye, and crippled of limb. He raised aloft a heavily sealed document, and tapped upon it with a finger. And the animal cry, once more, of:

“Have mercy upon me! Have mercy, my countrymen!”

And then, and then—though I do not remember much of this part—a noose; the tattered train of a silken gown; some smart Cossack crests; the bald patch of a satisfied, cheerful Collector. Yet only the last is what I remember distinctly. For a

moment an unseen hand had drawn aside the veil—had shown me that much. Then it had drawn it to again.

Thereafter, were they months that passed, or years? Greatly do I confuse time. All that I know for certain is that snows came, and rain, and hailstones, and—and much else that was strange.

Yet stranger still are the tricks that memory plays me. At one moment is my memory extraordinarily clear. At another moment it becomes seamed with gaps. If I can recall every moment of a given day, I have also to let whole years go by unrecorded! True, the doctors say that, if I be treated on a system, the missing years will come back to me, and my “present moments of lucidity” merge into consecutiveness. But to be “cured,” to have my memory equalised? No, I have no desire for that. Sufficient my “present moments of lucidity.”

Yet I am much as I used to be, and can tell my story well. I can place anything, remember anything. With one exception, though. But what of that? I can recall every little crease and pimple on Sashka's neck; every wrinkle on my friend the Collector's

face; every word which I uttered. With one exception, though. . . . At the same time, you will notice that I have grown curiously thinner.

The war has long ago thundered out, and I am living in absolute retirement. What retirement, indeed! I know nothing of the world's doings, for I have ceased to catch the least glimpse of life. I cannot even determine, cannot even guess, whether it is in a hospital that I am confined, or—or in another place. I am given no newspapers; I am given no letters. No, even my letters are not given to me. But *one* letter I have. It is a letter from my friend the Collector. How it reached me I do not know. I only know that one day I found it lying on the table after the dumb youth who sometimes brings my dinner had left the room. Sometimes I try to get that dumb youth to talk; but though he smiles and listens, he never says anything. Stay, though! Recently he did say something. It was the word "soon."

How he reminds me of Sashka! Yes, he is just such a high-cheekboned, thick-set young fellow as Sashka was.

The other day they led me out, and along corridors, and upstairs and downstairs, until

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at last, they left me face to face with a disagreeable-looking man on whose table were a couple of revolvers. Yet so extraordinary, so devoid of all sense, was that conversation that I simply cannot reproduce it. I know that the man's idea was to get me to remember the happenings of the missing years, for he asked me where I was during that time. Was I not on service with General N.? What was I to reply? I could only reply that the years in question had passed from me. Whereupon he told me to go and write down all that I know.

And—I am writing it down.

Sometimes, too, I am disturbed by gentlemen who call themselves doctors. They seat themselves around me, and put unexpected and exceedingly foolish questions, in the hope, apparently, of catching me up. And then they shrug their shoulders when they find that I know nothing, can remember nothing, of the sort that they want. And yesterday one of them said to his companions as he tapped upon the table:

“I tell you that the end is not far off.”

Well, if so, be it so. . . .

Yes, I am living in absolute retirement. And where is Colonel Babukin? Curiously

enough, no one knows. And Sashka? No, of him, again, nothing is known. It is as though everything had become lost, dropped, during some process of shaking. And even my imagination seems to have become lost. Yet surely there must be a trace of it somewhere? Only in this faulty machine, my brain, can it have come utterly to an end. Why, else, should the gentlemen (whether doctors or otherwise) who come to see me and read my notes assert that all this past of mine has been conceived as "simulation" or "fancy" on my part, and ask me why, if I can remember even the smallest detail of that which I assert to have happened, I should so "stupidly" insist upon knowing nothing about "the most important part of the time," or about—— But here they fall to talking in terms so extraordinary that——

Well, *was* it all a dream? It is a business of which I can make nor head nor tail. . . .

Yes, the doctors say that I am "pretending" or "fancying." They say that I ought to know more than I do about what *they* assert to have happened. . . . Or are they, for some reason, afraid on my account? — are they trying merely to reassure me?

Well, they need not trouble about that, for I have got over my illness now, and, if fed a little better, should soon be recovered entirely, and enabled to resume my work at the University, where I used to be a promising physicist, and assistant to the late Lebedev.

The fools! "Fancy!" Why, I have here a letter from the most practical of men, from my friend the ex-Collector of — from Perm, a man with the most ordinary bald patch on his head. True, at one time even I doubted his existence; but, since, I have received him from this letter, which you can see for yourself.

In the letter he says that he is no longer a Treasury official, but—that he is engaged in sticking up envelopes, and in peddling wares about a bazaar! The fool! And he has not a notion where Colonel Babukin may be! Yet, mark you, he does not say that Colonel Babukin *never had an existence*. All that he says is—and you can see the letter for yourself: "The best thing that you can do is to forget both that devilry and the demon with the *tazik* on his head."

Well, I intend to show this letter to those

gentlemen: and then they can communicate with the Collector in person if they want to do so. *He* will very soon tell them whether or not this is "fancy"!

But, do you know, I think I saw the Collector recently. Yes, certainly I did so, and he was looking just the same. Stay, though! He was also looking strangely shrivelled, whilst the flesh under his eyes was hanging in bags, and the bald patch on his head, seemingly, less shiny than it used to be.

Well, he and I went and confronted the disagreeable-looking man. Face to face with him, and with one another, we discussed the past. Colonel Babukin did really exist. In that particular the Collector confirmed me; though also he added, for some reason or other, that at the time my faculties were not quite in order.

From further discussion we were prevented by the fact that he was led away to the left, and I to the right. But first the disagreeable-looking man intimated that we should see one another again to-morrow. . . .

How I wish that Colonel Babukin would appear! I should be so glad to see him, and to have a heart to heart talk with him! True, in

his system there was much that was chaotic, much that was born merely of a sick brain: but at least its hypothesis was interesting. Those ultra-green waves of his. Physicists do not recognise such waves, and therefore they must be nonsense; but still the question might be considered as at least a possible factor of influence upon the nervous system; at least might it be adopted as a theory. For, to judge logically, if we know that there exist certain extinctions forces which can destroy the nerve centres, why should there not be in existence also forces capable of charging souls with gentle, heavenly light? It is a factor which would fit in with the working of things: and I, for one, believe it to exist. If it does not, if it does not—then life is not worth living.

FINIS

